

HERO CORPS ROOKIE

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To all heroes!

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU CAN EARN your degree in as little as two years.”

The tattoos on my back are easier to cover than the ones on my hands.

“Take only the classes you need.”

My tattoos are a fantasy. They’re a fantasy on how my life should be. There’s the cross located on my back; it’s my largest one, but I never use it. Then there are smaller ones: the pistol, the knife, the snake, and of course there’s Spike. He’s my dog, my external teeth, but my tattoos are much more than decorations on my skin.

I look at my hands, and I know there’s nothing I can do to cover them for my job interview. I wish I could, but I must leave before I’m late.

“Call us right now, and one of our operators will help you with your enrollment and financial aid package,” says the TV as I leave my apartment.

I never remember to shut off the TV before I go out. I’ve grown up in a house full of sounds. We lived with our grandmother, and I could always hear the voices of my brother and two sisters.

Anna is the smartest one out of all of us. She’s four years younger

than me. She likes school and her teachers. She gets good grades, and everyone hopes she'll eventually go to university.

I just want to get a job on my own.



"Valentine Vega. Is that your real name?" asks the manager of the local Mexican restaurant, El Gatos, not caring about my answer. He shakes my hand, but instead of releasing it, he holds on and won't let it go. "Tell me why I should give you this job?" he asks.

He wants to play a game with me: see who's the bigger man. He wants to see who's stronger.

"Because I'm... It's Val. My name is Val. I don't go by Valentine," I say, but the manager won't let me continue, and he squeezes my hand harder. He's big, and most would suffer from his grip, but not me.

He thinks he's stronger. I'll show him nothing, and I know he's getting mad. I let him turn my hand, and he can see it. It's the mark he sees, the tattoo, given to me by the Auxiliary Hero Corps, and he knows who I am, or what I am. He lets go.

"Do you think my customers want to eat around someone with this on their hand?" he asks.

I know he's mad because I'm not showing any pain. He thinks I'm not showing him respect.

"You have too much ink. I know who you are." He finally lets go of my hand. "I don't need any of you hero-kind working for me."

"I didn't think you'd care," I say. I wait. "I'm not a hero yet. I'm only in the Auxiliary Corps."

"What? Just because you have an awful job with the Corps doesn't mean I have to give you one in my restaurant. You heroes think you're privileged, but ask most businessmen like me, and we'll tell you we don't like your kind. You're bad for business."

Now I'm mad. He may not be able to hurt me physically, but he's gotten to me, and it shows on my face. He's happy now.

The man does something I'm not expecting: he tries to pick a fight.

“Okay, tough guy, take a swing at me. The press always eats it up when one of you hero-punks hit a civilian. They’d have to put you in jail. It’s where you all belong.”

“It isn’t illegal to be a hero,” I say to him. I should keep my mouth shut, but it’s too late. I know I should leave. I want to turn and walk away.

“Your kind always thinks you’re better than the rest of us, but none of you can make it in the real world. Isn’t that funny? You think you’re strong because of your powers, but the business man is the one who pays for you heroes. All of us taxpayers pay for you, —and I’m tired of paying for all you freeloaders. I have the jobs to give. I can hire who I want when I want. And I can fire them too.”

He pauses, and then he says, in a voice, I’ve heard on TV, *“Maybe I’m your nemesis, your archenemy. I’m the evil Restaurant Owner. Or maybe I’m worse...I’m the Galactic Emperor of Chips and Salsa.”*

I say nothing and start to walk away. I don’t know if I’ll ever have an arch, an enemy, someone to consume me.

“Goodbye, tough guy. I’m sorry, but this interview must be over,” he says. He’s loud enough for everyone in the kitchen to hear him. “I’m finished with you, but fear not because I still have time to turn my attention to the evil carnivorous lunchtime customers lurking in my dining room. I’m the real hero in this city, not you.”



My other sister is named America, and she loves to dance. She moves with the ease and grace all women wish they had. At celebrations, she’s the one everyone watches. She’s also my big sister, and she’s the one that always took care of us when Grandmother wasn’t home. She’s a checkout clerk at a small market, and I haven’t seen her in a few months. She still lives with Grandmother, and I know someday she’d like to get married and have a house full of kids of her own.

My grandmother never wanted me to leave her big house. She

doesn't understand. There's plenty of space there, and I could move back home and into my old bedroom.

"When are you coming home?" she always asks. "The house is so empty."

I know she's trying to make me feel better, but with America, Anna, Rudy, and my Aunt Sophie with her two babies living there, I know it's not true.

"There is always justice at the Justice Law Firm," says the TV. "Call us when you need Justice on your side."

There is nothing more I can do today. I have another job, but that job always waits until dark. "I'm sorry," I say to Spike. "I didn't mean to keep you covered so long."

Spike frees himself from his tattoo when I take my shirt off. Instead of running around the apartment or wanting to go for a walk, the big dog jumps up on the bed and finds the spot where he usually sleeps. He waits for me to join him. I scratch him behind his ear. That's where he likes it the most.

My snake also crawls off my skin. She never actually leaves the bottom of my forearm, but still, she needs her freedom from the ink holding her in place.

Before I fall asleep, I say to Spike, "Okay, I need a couple of hours of shuteye before we go on patrol tonight."

When he's next to me, I know I can sleep.



My brother Rudy loves soccer. He could keep kicking the ball all day. It's what gives him joy, and most days he doesn't come back inside until it's truly dark, or until Grandmother pleads with him to come home. "Grandmother, I scored the winning goal," he always says to her.

"Of course you do, you always do well," she responds, and she's always proud of him. "But there will always be another soccer game, and you only have one family. You need to be home on time for dinner. You know I worry when you aren't on time."

Rudy will graduate high school in a few months, and he doesn't know what he'll do for a job after.

"The Tribal Store is the only place you'll ever want for your tattoo and piercing needs," says the TV.

It's almost time for me to leave.

The snake has returned to her inky home on my arm. Spike is awake, but he needs a walk, and I know Smokey might be a little mad at me for being late. Without another job, there's no hope of me leaving the Corps.

I walk to the diner and it makes me hungry. I'll try to order something quick off of the menu before we have to go out on patrol.

There's a moment before I walk into the restaurant's front door that always takes my breath out of me, and it almost feels like I've been punched in the stomach. It's a little death I suffer every night, and it meets me when I go to my job.

"You're late. It's the Sam F. Houston middle of the night and you're late," says Smokey when I finally make it to our meeting. Smokey never curses; he just substitutes other words for his bad ones instead.

We always meet at the Templeton Diner, our unofficial headquarters, on Granville Street. As many times as I've been there, I've never yet met the owner, Joey, and I know I won't meet him here tonight.

"Hire somebody else," I say, sitting down across from the large man in the back booth. He's the kind of guy that looks like he should be running around the woods with hillbillies and a banjo instead of sitting in a greasy diner in a rundown part of our city. An old Formica table separates us. Smokey is eating his typical meal, a heavy breakfast. The overloaded plate consists of four eggs, plenty of bacon, a pile of potatoes, and two almost burnt pieces of toast. On the other side of the plate is a large mug of black coffee. I can tell he hasn't been there long because he hasn't yet wolfed down his bacon.

"Val, I can't find any other Dixie Bags who'll work so cheap," says Smokey.

It isn't true. He might be mad, but he can't hire or fire me. All of us are in the Auxiliary Corps together, we work on the government's

dime, and they like to keep us employed so they can keep an eye on us.

The Auxiliary Hero Corps and the Hero Corps bring structure to our lives, and if we weren't on their payroll, God only knows what would happen. It doesn't mean I don't try to leave the Corps from time to time, but I haven't been successful in my attempts at outside employment. Smokey laughs at me every time he hears I'm trying to become a civilian, and he says to me about my recent job interview, "What did you go do something stupid like that for?"

"When we come back, we'll have all the highlights from our celebrity dancers," says the TV, recapping tonight's dance competition. The TV's mounted over the kitchen door, and Smokey is in the perfect position to view it from where he sits.

I'm not the last of this evening's patrol to arrive. We're waiting for Daphnia. When she finally arrives, she plops down next to me and says, "I'm exotic, and I look good in my boots, right? You'd think I could get a cab. But those guys hate me. I swear they do."

Daphnia always surprises us. It's one of her abilities. She's different than anyone else I know in the Auxiliary Corps. Maybe that's why I like her so much. She's unique, and I smile when she's near.

"I could go anywhere tonight looking the way I do, but not in a cab. How they hate us sometimes. And why is no one asking me to a party? I feel like stepping out after work tonight. Smokey, how about we party till morning instead of fighting crime? I promise we'll have fun. We could go dancing. We'll have a few laughs." She takes a piece of toast off his plate.

"The boys only go out with you once, and then they never get a second chance," says Smokey with a smirk. He pauses a moment and then asks, "Why do you always eat my toast?"

Daphnia winks. "Your toast reminds me of the men I've dated. A woman can't forget her past loves or the taste of burnt toast. Both leave a bad taste in your mouth."

Smokey shifts his arm to guard his other piece of toast. "I didn't know you were a philosopher."

"Is that why you've never asked me out? Because I'm smart? I always thought it was because you get jealous when I talk about my love life." Daphnia looks directly at Smokey. "I know you want me, but I never thought you'd be the type who'd have to eat big old bites of a jealous sandwich before you'd ask me out."

Smokey doesn't say anything, just raises his hand in defense, the other piece of toast in it.

Daphnia plucks the toast from his hand. "And here I thought you saved your toast for me on purpose. Don't worry, Mr. Bear, I know you're shy."

She turns her attention to me, gives me a smile.

"What about you, Val? Is there anything I can do to corrupt you?"

Smokey says, "Leave him alone, he's still a child."

"I don't think I'm strong enough for you," I say, pretty sure that I'm blushing.

Luckily, Smokey changes the subject. "I have a feeling we're going to have a good night," he says. "I hope the two of you are ready."

We're going out on foot patrol like we always do, helping combat crime in the city. We're there to help the police. True, the local constables don't actually want our help, but there's nothing they can do about it.

We, the Auxiliary Corps, do the small jobs, the jobs a regular hero wouldn't bother themselves with. It's mostly petty crimes we deal with each night. But that keeps us busy. We won't finish until morning, and we're good at getting our hands dirty in the meantime. We protect our city the best we can from the threats of its low-level criminals.

We're following our normal route, and Daphnia is getting less happy the farther we get. After a mile or so of walking, she's lagging behind. I elbow Smokey and we wait for her to catch up with us.

"Do you think we're going to get paid this week? You know, with there being a holiday on Friday?" I ask, but I don't even wait for a response. I already know the answer, I'm just making conversation. "Did you ever think about becoming a cop?" I ask Smokey.

We're still waiting for Daphnia. She's getting closer, and I can hear her boots.

"I thought about it," Smokey replies. "I think we all think about it at some point, but it never works out. Too many rules. The cops like to keep us in our place. That's why the Feds started the Auxiliary Hero Corps in the first place. They don't like us, but they know we need a purpose—to keep us out of trouble." He's also watching Daphnia, and the night is getting colder.

I'm surprised when I hear the Hippie. I've been paying attention to Daphnia and didn't notice him coming from the other direction.

"Now there's relief for foot pain . . . all you have to do is walk it away." Hippie sounds almost like a voice from a television commercial. He likes to walk everywhere, and almost every time we see him he's by himself. Cold, heat, snow, or rain, the Old Hippie doesn't care. He isn't bothered by the weather.

"Hippie!" says Smokey, sounding almost joyful. Hippie was known as one of the best heroes of his generation. Both he and Smokey were originally recruited into the now-defunct Hero Union Corps, but they got transferred over when the Union was replaced by the new agency, the Hero Corps. Hippie went straight into the main Hero Corps of course, but Smokey was placed in the Auxiliary. He still hopes to one day get a promotion to the main Hero Corps.

The Old Hippie is an old white guy wearing a jacket he must have found at a thrift store. It's a navy blue sailor's jacket that makes him look like an ancient actor in an old black-and-white movie. Daphnia once said to me, 'Only an old homeless white guy could pull off that look in a coat like that.'

"Are you still looking for him?" Smokey asks his friend. I know he's talking about Hippie's nemesis.

Hippie nods. "It's impossible for him to hide forever. It's in our stars: we'll always cross paths with each other." Hippie's typical fortune cookie philosophy. I don't understand the guy, but I like him.

"Nothing truer has ever been said, my friend. Your words have

always been wise,” says Smokey. I know he doesn’t understand Hippie either.

Daphnia finally catches up to us. She rolls her eyes when she sees Hippie.

“How goes it with your own arch?” asks the Old Hippie. “Has he come back to town?”

“Nah, it’s been too long. And there hasn’t been any news about him.” Smokey tilts his head toward me. “So they make me train the newbies. It isn’t too bad of a job.”

Smokey continues. We have heard this story many times. “I went to the Oregon State Mental Institution last year because I heard rumors he’d been a patient there, but as soon as I got there I found out it wasn’t true. There was just some poor sitting duck who had been claiming to be him. The guy didn’t even look like the Fire Starter. I was almost ready to walk away when this fake says to me, ‘He told me to tell you, he’ll come and find you when the time is right. Until then, quit looking for him.’”

Hippie raises an eyebrow. “So what did you say? Did you try and find out any more clues to help track him down?”

“No.” Smokey looks over at his friend. “That’s when I quit. I decided that if my nemesis didn’t want to be found, I would respect his wishes and not look for him. I figured it’s the least I could do. The guy deserves that much from me.”

I give a disapproving cough, and it makes Daphnia laugh. Both Smokey and the Old Hippie give me a judgmental look, Hippie says, “Youth is wasted on the young.”

Smokey says, “Did you think of that on your own?”

“Nope,” says Hippie. “Got that one from when it was said to Jimmy Stewart in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. The dumb kid was reluctant to give Donna Reed a kiss.”

“I thought I’d heard that before. That movie’s an oldie but a goodie,” says Smokey.

“How are these two doing, anyway?” Hippie glances over at me and Daphnia. “Are they going to make it to the big show?”

"Is anyone ever ready? But they'll muddle through and make it to the home stretch," says Smokey, turning to look back at Daphnia and I. He likes to talk like he's a baseball manager when he's assessing us, and I think he must watch too much sports on TV. "If they're lucky, they might even earn a Super Hero name, even a nemesis of their own someday."

I take the opportunity to speak up. "I intend to make it out of the Auxiliary Corps and into the Hero Corps someday."

"A voyage should last a lifetime," says the Old Hippie, turning to face me. "Maybe we'll sail off the edge of the world before this is all over."

"What does that mean?" says Smokey. "I can never figure out anything you say."

Daphnia interrupts. "All right, boys, I'm going on ahead. It's way too cold for me to be standing around listening to two old men talking all night." She shakes her head, and I assume her next words are directed at Smokey. "I can't believe I asked you out to have some fun. What was I thinking?"

She walks over to me and her hands reach for my jacket, which she zips up to my neck. She looks me in the eye. "It's cold out here. We can't have you catching a bug."

The two older heroes pay no attention to her, and I watch as she walks down an even darker city block than the one we came from.

"Should I go with her?" I ask.

"She's a big girl," says the Old Hippie. "She can take care of herself."

"Booster Rocket. The Four-Hour Energy Drink! And Your Lady Will Love It Too!" exclaims a billboard above us, on top of an old cold-water flat.

Smokey resumes his conversation with Hippie, from back before I interrupted them. "Like I was saying, I really don't want to fight with my old nemesis anymore, and I hope he never shows up." He's lying. "It's too much hassle. Always having to look over your shoulder. It's more work than it's worth."

“That’s what the man wants you to think,” says Hippie. “Someday he’ll be back. It’s your fate. We are almost...”

As Hippie continues with his usual prophesying, Smokey listens, Smokey listens to a friend, and he believes what his friend is saying. He needs to because he needs to believe in the Hero Code.

Daphnia had already left and the two decide to follow her. At last, we start moving again.

It couldn’t have been more than three minutes since she Daphnia walked off on her own. She’s left our usual route though and might’ve moved down an alley. It’s darker than it should be, even for this time of the night, and Smokey tells me to slow down while we wait for the Old Hippie to catch up. The older hero doesn’t see as well as the two of us at night.

While I wait, I call out for Daphnia. But there’s no response. I fear we let her get too far away from us. I’m beginning to wish Smokey hadn’t let her out of his sight.

There are times when we don’t need to speak, and this is one of them. I push back my sleeve and take off the first tattoo on my right arm. The small pistol always feels good in my hand. It’s cold to the touch. Not like the others, which are always warm. I like the compact design of my Beretta Tomcat because it fits so easily when it’s wrapped around the front of my forearm.

After a few blocks, I spot someone lying on the ground, and I run up to them. It goes against my training and my gut, but I know it’s Daphnia, and I want to help her. When I get closer I see she’s lying on her back. She’s still alive, thank goodness, and she points her finger to a building on the other side.

That’s when I see him. He’s standing in a corner. He’s wearing a grubby sweater and a black woolen cap, but the cap is too small for his head. He smokes a cigarette, and he clearly isn’t afraid of me, even though I have the Tomcat out and pointed right at him.

“Move where—to where I can see you better. I want to see your hands,” I say, and straighten my arms. I can hear a wheezing sound

coming from Daphnia. Her breathing is ragged, but I can't look at her right now.

"No, square cat, I don't think so," says the man. His voice isn't ancient like the Old Hippie or Smokey's. It's young, like mine.

I wish I could get to Spike, but I'm wearing a jacket and a shirt, and Spike can't get free until I expose my skin to the cold air.

"I saw you, Walt Whitman. Pawing at the meat, grubbing for all the young boys," says my new enemy, spouting off a few lines of poetry. A few moments of standing there have helped my eyes, and I can make him out better. I feel that if I could pull the trigger, I might have a chance of hitting him with a lucky shot.

"While we walk through the streets, we might find shade among the trees, but we are lonely, so lonely, especially the boys amongst men," continues from the man on the other side of the alley. He throws his cigarette aside, and I can see the weapon he holds in his hand. It's a pistol, an old-fashioned Luger. "Why don't you wait patiently for me, Walt?"

That does it. I can't move. I want to squeeze the trigger of my own pistol, but his verse has frozen me.

I hear Daphnia. Weakly, she says, "Don't listen. Don't let his words . . . They'll poison your ears."

Too late. I'm already in his poem's grip. I can't move. I want to fight, but I can't. Somehow I manage to pull my pistol's trigger, but his poem throws off my shot. I miss.

"Too late for you, Walt," he says. "You should've shot at me sooner. Maybe then you would've had a chance." He pauses and then starts with his poetry again. "We drop to our knees; we wait for an America that's forever gone. One that'll never be. An America without a chicken in every pot."

My body doesn't listen to me. There is nothing I can do. I'm solid, and I drop. I'm on my knees and I listen to him. I can't even squeeze the trigger of the Tomcat again. It's too difficult. I must be still, and listen to his insane poetry.

He's almost on top of me when he says, "Home to our duplexes,

condos, and our mini-mansions, where the lights will go permanently out.” He raises the arm that holds the small pistol. I finally know the villain. I realize who it is. It’s Hippie’s nemesis, the Beat, and I know he’s going to kill me.

I need to rip off my coat if I’m going to survive. I want to help Daphnia, I want to help myself, but to do those things I need to get off my coat so I can release Spike. He can help me in this fight. But if I don’t do it soon, I’ll end up just like Daphnia. Or worse.

I’m going to fight. I know I’m strong. I start to get off my jacket. He moves toward me from the back of the alley. He’s smaller than me, and he’s fast. I still have the Tomcat in my hand, and I know I need to squeeze the trigger, but before I can fire my weapon, the Beat snaps two fingers—and the sound knocks me backward and onto the ground.

I’ve lost the pistol, but I’m free for a moment, and I reach out to try and find it. It’s a mistake I shouldn’t have made. I should be freeing Spike instead.

I try again to unzip my jacket. It doesn’t matter how cold it is at night, I still know better than to go out on patrol and not be prepared. I should have had the jacket open, to begin with, and I’m sure Smokey will have something to say to me about getting caught in a bad situation. That is if I survive.

“What are you doing, my pretty? This isn’t Kansas anymore,” the Beat says. “Toto is tucked safely away. There’s no doggy to run at Dorothy’s side on the yellow brick road.”

He knows about Spike. He’s standing over me now, and I can’t save myself.

It’s Smokey who saves me. The man-bear charges at full speed. The force of Smokey’s tackle throws the Beat backward, and together they splash into a puddle of rainwater. Smokey has the Beat in his grasp, and his paws are starting to get at the villain.

I get to my feet. I know I need to help Smokey in this fight. He isn’t as fast as Daphnia or me—although I’m surprised by just how fast this old bear can still move when he needs to.

The Old Hippie joins us in the fight. His style is different than

other heroes I know. He tries to daze and confuse his opponent. He uses images and sounds as his weapons, sending forth a generated psychedelic hallucination.

He spreads his arms apart and fills the whole alley with pulsating sights and sounds. One time I heard him describe his powers as a heroic kind of LSD. He called it his Loud Sensory Disturbance, which made me laugh. But this is the first time I've ever been inside his psychedelic storm, and I know I'm going to get a good blast of it. I need to get to Spike and forget about the handgun.

His LSD floats around us. His power not only slows the Beat, it also slows Smokey, who had gained the upper paw. Unfortunately, this means Smokey's advantage has been lost, as the Old Hippie's LSD has neutralized all of us.

I float in and out of the Hippie's melody. It takes me a while, but I'm finally able to remove my shirt. I touch the tattoo, and Spike jumps to life.

He bites at the hallucinations around him, not knowing what they are, but Spike is a Super Hero in his own way, and I know he'll keep up his attack until he finally gets to the dazed poet. When that happens, the stunned villain will no longer have the ability to fight.

It happens sooner than I thought. Spike's large jaws bite into the man's leg. I can see the blood spilling onto the bricks. Spike's attack negates the effects of the Hippie's trance, and the Beat snaps out of his daze. His first reaction is to strike the dog with his fist, but Spike's jaws are too powerful. The Beat won't gain his freedom by punching my dog.

I find the Tomcat. I realize that we have the chance to finish off the Beat once and for all. My weapons have the ability to do so. Around me, LSD twists, swirls, and flows. The Old Hippie can only hold the LSD in the air for so long, and his power is beginning to weaken. The blackness of the alley is begging to creep back in. Smokey is waking up, moving once again toward our opponent.

The Beat sees he's outnumbered, but he's occupied with fighting off

my dog. I'm now close enough to shoot him. I raise the gun and take careful aim. I'm going to finish this villain off forever.

I begin to squeeze the trigger—in fact, I think I've already shot the bullet—when I'm knocked sideways by a blow from a large paw. My gun goes off, and I miss my target. I fall onto the damp bricks of the alley and look to see who hit me hard enough to knock me over. I'm surprised to see Smokey standing over me. He's still full of fur, but he's returning to his normal ugly self.

"What did you do that for?" I ask. "I could've killed him!"

I want to raise the Tomcat one more time, but I can tell by Smokey's face that he doesn't want me to.

"It's not our fight. Put away the gun," he says. "Stay here and protect yourself. I'll take care of Daphnia."

"But," I say.

"He isn't your nemesis, Val. He's Hippie's." Smokey goes over to Daphnia and takes a knee next to her. "There isn't anything else for us to do. Someday you'll understand. When you have an arch of your own. I'm going to help Daphnia, but you stay next to me."

He looks over at me, and says loudly, "And call off Spike."

"It isn't a fair fight," I say. "We could kill him."

Smokey scowls at me. "Shut your mouth. It's the code. The Code of the Hero Corps. It isn't about being fair. It's about following the rules. Now call off your dog."

The Hippie is finished and exhausted, but so is the Beat. The two foes are drained; they have nothing left to continue the fight.

"Come here, Spike," I call, then turn my attention back to Smokey. "I'm not a hero," I say to him as I stand up. "And I don't know how I'm ever going to become one with you around."

"You're going to be a hero someday, like those few who are lucky enough," says Smokey. He's trying to help Daphnia, but he doesn't know what to do. "Someday you'll hang on to the code because sometimes it's the only thing you got. It's the hero's code that keeps us going, even if we are only in the Auxiliary Corps."

I hear the Beat laugh as he leaves us in the alley. He slowly walks away. There's no rush.



By the time the paramedics get to us, Daphnia lies dead in a puddle of dirty water. The Beat has defeated us. The Hippie stands patiently beside me and our fallen comrade. We'll wait for the police to arrive. There will be questions, and we'll have answers, and hopefully, they won't ask the important question: Why did you let your friend die? Because I know we don't have a good answer.

I want to take Daphnia's arms and pull her out of the dirty water, take her home, or somewhere, but the paramedics are still going to try to take her to the hospital. I'll stay with her as long as she's here.

As I wait, I realize that I don't understand what's going on. Why is the Beat so young? Shouldn't he be older than Hippie?

I understand one thing though: I'm going to kill the Beat the next time I see him. His heart will stop beating because of me. I don't care what Smokey says. Even he isn't going to stop me.

CHAPTER TWO

Excerpt from My Observations of the Superheroes of the 20th Century By Steven Luther Hoffman

Section 18 The Sixties – The Anti-Hero

My fellow scholars often tell me that the Golden Age of the Superheroes is the 1940's. When I hear them say that, I always reply to them by saying the same thing: "While there might be some truth in your statement . . ."

I always point to another decade. "It was during the 60's when our idea of the hero changed forever."

That's the decade when almost everything we knew about heroes took on a new and radical form. I like to quote the memorable cinematic traitor Cypher, in the 1999 film The Matrix, who says to Neo: 'Buckle your seat belts, Dorothy, 'cause Kansas is going bye-bye.' And so are my observations of the heroes from this turbulent decade.

Never before has a culture changed as much as did the culture of heroes in the second half of the twentieth century. While it might be true

that a generation of heroes had never been so pampered, well fed, and lacking for wants, from clothing and housing, the heroes born of this time were also generally overexposed to television. There were many failed heroes who came from this time period: The Grub, The Garbage Can Family, The Domestic Welder, and Commando Nanny. Yet there were some successful heroes that came into their own during this decade and were a real change from those heroes of the past. The most notable ones were Dr. Marcus Von Pepper, M.D.; the flamboyant police heroes, the Hawaiian Hang Five; the lighthearted caped duo of Gowan and Morton; and, finally, The Hippie, who would later become known in our time as The Old Hippie.

The Old Hippie was an army vet who was wounded during the early years of the Vietnam conflict. He didn't discover his powers until after he returned home from his military duty...



"I'm surprised we haven't seen the Hippie yet," says Smokey.

I'm secretly hoping he won't find us. I want to get another a chance at the Beat on my own. I'm walking along with Smokey, and I realize what I need to do. It didn't matter how many nights we met up or we went out on our patrols. I know the Beat won't come out until one of us is on our own, vulnerable. That's how he had attacked Daphnia earlier, but I didn't care.

"Smokey, we could separate. I could go on by myself, and maybe he'll finally come out and fight us. We could be as old as Hippie before we get a chance to fight the Beat again if we keep going on like this."

Just as I say it, I look and I see the Old Hippie, faithful as a geyser at Yellowstone. There he is, and I'm disappointed. He shuffles toward us. I stare at him as he comes our way. He's crossing Ash Street next to a corner bar and some of the local patrons are standing out in front smoking cigarettes. A few of them have brought their drinks outside with them as well. When a cop comes by, later on, I know he'll usher those with their drinks back inside.

The Old Hippie passes by them with his slow, shuffling stride. Night after night Hippie follows the same route to meet up with us. One of the women standing with a group of young men offers him a dollar. With his shabby looks, she probably thinks he's homeless.

The woman and her friends start to laugh, and I can hear her say, "Listen, bum, if you want this dollar you're going to have to dance for it."

This sometimes happens to the Hippie, but he doesn't care what people say or if they're being mean. He's not the kind of guy to get too upset.

We're standing in front of the old Vogue theatre. A movie hasn't been shown on its screen in years, and the abandoned movie palace gives me the creeps.

I'm watching Hippie, but Smokey is still talking to me about my suggestion. "I keep thinking about the night when we lost Daphnia, and it reminds me of those stories the Vietnam vets told me when I worked at the VA hospital. Did I ever tell you how the Viet Cong used to kill off green American soldiers while they were on patrol in the jungle?"

"So you weren't always a part of the Auxiliary Corps?" I ask. I'm not paying as much attention to Smokey as I should; I'm still keeping my eye on the Old Hippie down the street. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Smokey turning to look at his friend as well.

"Nope, I tried the civilian life just like everyone else. I was out of high school, and I got a job as an orderly in the veteran's hospital. That's where I met Hippie. He told me stories about the war."

"If he's truly a peace-loving hippie . . . wouldn't he have been against the war?"

"Sure, but those were different times. There were a lot of soldiers who marched for peace when they returned home. It hasn't always been the same way it is today. We treat our veterans better now than we did back then. It must have been difficult for him returning back to a country of anger and hate."

I want to make sure the Hippie is okay. I don't think he has seen us yet. He's distracted by the patrons in front of the bar.

Smokey nudges me and the two of us start to make our way toward him, just as a precaution. “Hippie told me the Viet Cong used to have tunnels, safe bases where they could stay underground and out of sight of the Americans. In there, they could eat, sleep, train—and there was nothing the Americans could do about it. From those bases, they could also pop up and strike anywhere. They would wait to wallop the American soldiers where they were the weakest.”

“So you think the Beat has gone underground? Someplace safe?” I’m still watching Hippie. He looks as if he’s joking with the group, and he amuses them by starting a dance that spins him around, and he’s waving his arms too. In his mind I think he must be still in the 1960’s, reliving the good times. If he could, he might even imagine flowers in his hair.

“That was the Hippie’s job in the war: to go underground. They gave him a pistol and a flashlight, called him a ‘tunnel rat.’ He would fight by himself, and he’d have to go down inside to face them head-on. Can you imagine him down in those tunnels? But that was before he joined the Hero Union Corps, and I don’t know if he knew the full extent of his powers at that time.”

“That’s what I want to do,” I say. “I want to go inside the Beat’s lair, or wherever it is he’s hiding. I know I could get him into the open so we can all have a chance at him. The three of us could finish him off. We owe it to Daphnia.” I add.

Smokey’s voice is even sterner when he says, “What we owe to Daphnia is to carry on the way the Auxiliary Corps expects us to and let Hippie fight the Beat on his own. The Beat is his villain. The fight is between the two of them. It’s not our place.”

I want to argue with Smokey, but I know I won’t change his mind. We’re members of the Corps.

But Smokey can’t predict what will happen if we meet up with the villain again. I have the Tomcat, Spike, and my other tattoos I can use as weapons, and I still want to be the one who finishes off the Beat.

It’s another night patrol, and I’m sure my hope of finding the Beat will fade quickly again. The mad poet had disappeared back into the

blackness of the city. The Beat is good at covering his tracks, and we won't find him again until he wants to be found. Now the only thing left for us to do is wait. And to carry on.

I know Smokey is disappointed with my suggestion. I know he wants to get back at the Beat as much as I do, but Smokey is a rule-follower. He always limits himself to the Corps' rules.

But I don't want to limit myself; I want to find the Beat and punish him. If the Beat comes in front of the muzzle of my Tomcat again, I will squeeze the trigger, and I won't miss this time. I won't even let Smokey get in the way.

I know Smokey thinks I might get into trouble, and he wants to tell me not to go rogue. He might say, "Isn't your first duty to the Auxiliary Corps?" But for now, he's wise enough to keep his mouth shut, mostly.

Rogue heroes become an instant enemy to the Corps. The only path we can follow is the one paved with the rules of the Auxiliary Corps. And the rules for the Hero Corps are basically the same. But there's no Rogue Hero Corps. Rogues end up becoming villains most of the time, and it's a line we don't want to cross.

The Old Hippie is paid a dollar for his dance. I look at the old hero as he takes a bow, and I wonder if I'm going to become a rogue and an instant enemy to the Corps. Together, we finish our patrol, and I go home with too many thoughts in my head.



For the next few weeks, Smokey and I continue to have our nightly meeting at the Templeton. He usually orders the largest breakfast on the menu: eggs, potatoes, bacon, sausage, pancakes, and toast. I'm always eager to get started on our nighttime search, but I make sure I eat. Without Daphnia, the two of us aren't a match for the Beat. The Auxiliary Corps' bureaucrats keep promising a replacement for Daphnia, and I can tell Smokey is getting tired of no one showing up to take her place.

The two of us go out as soon as we're finished eating. We head to

our usual meeting place, where we'll wait for Hippie. Tonight's meeting place is Hester Park, on the northwest corner next to the Japanese teahouse. The Hippie doesn't have a cell phone, so we'll wait for him as long as it takes. With his help, the three of us will be a match for the Beat.

Or at least I hope we will be.

I say, trying to make a joke, "Of course, I get stuck with you and the Hippie, and neither one of you has a cell phone. This would be so much simpler if the two of you would embrace the twenty-first century. It isn't 1963, you know. There aren't any telephone booths around anymore."

Smokey doesn't respond right away. Then he says, "To tell you the truth, it never seemed important to me to get a cell phone. Who would I call? You? I talk to you every night. I guess I could have one so I could ring the Corps when I needed to." He pauses. "Nope, even that's a bad idea, because they'll be calling me every two minutes, always wanting something stupid. Or even worse, the Corps would want constant updates on our location."

"Maybe it isn't so bad for you, Smokey. But you know, these days, every normal, well-adjusted person knows they need one." I sigh. "I don't know why I'm wasting my time with this old argument. I know I'm not going to change your mind, and I shouldn't say anything."

Maybe the Beat knows we're out there looking for him because when the three of us are together there's no sign of him. Every night, no luck. I don't understand the mind of a villain of his caliber, I just know that he's either remaining in hiding or has gone totally off our radar. Everywhere we look, the trail has grown cold. There's nothing for us to follow.

"I don't know," says Smokey. "You know, I'm getting hungry and I think I actually may have told Hippie to meet us at Tim Hortons."

The doughnut shop is across the street from the main library on Robson Street. It's a few blocks from the park, and I don't say anything because this isn't the first time this has happened.

"You just ate, and I'm going to buy you a smartphone for Christ-

mas,” I say. “You could text, call people, and organize your life, dude, and we wouldn’t have messes like this, and you could remember things.” I should just keep quiet. He’s determined to go buy himself a mass of deep-fried sugar and flour.

When we get there the Hippie is waiting for us, and after a few minutes, he excuses himself to go use the facilities in the back.

“How old is Hippie?” I ask.

“Old,” says Smokey. The waitress brings him his plate of food and gives him a refill on his coffee.

“But I mean, how old is he? What’s his age?” I try to get Smokey to focus on my question instead of on the bear claw in front of him.

“He must be at least in his late sixties,” I suggest. “Think about it. Do you remember how he tells us stories about Haight-Ashbury, and how he was really in San Francisco in its heyday before he came north?”

“Yes, he tells us that same story over and over again. Peace, love, and all of that other nonsense.” Smokey looks up from his pastry, and I think he’s wondering whether he continue playing my game of twenty questions. “So what?”

“So, if the Old Hippie first started in the 1960’s, how old does that make the Beat? He’s got to be older,” I say.

I hoped I could get his gray matter flowing. “The Beat has been around longer. He must be in his seventies, or eighties, at least.” I paused. “But was that an old man we fought? No, it wasn’t. The Beat . . . he moves like a villain in his prime. He’s young. Decades away from using a walker, or getting pushed through the nursing home in a wheelchair.”

I wait, take a sip from my coffee cup, and put it back down before I speak again.

“Did the Beat move like a villain in his seventies? He killed Daphnia, and he could have killed me, too—easily—if you hadn’t shown up. If you ask me, he’s still a villain in his prime. Have you ever heard of a villain being so old?”

“No, I suppose I haven’t,” says Smokey. “Those old ones are either

dead, faded away, or in jail.” He thinks about it for a moment and asks, “Tickle my chin whiskers, what the heck is going on?”

I’ve gotten through to him. “I don’t know, but I know we weren’t fighting a seventy-year-old man. Daphnia may have only been in the Auxiliary Corps like me, but she should’ve been able to handle him on her own.”

Smokey takes another bite of his bear claw. “Maybe Hippie knows something we don’t.”

When Hippie returns from the facilities, Smokey says, “Could I get you a bear claw tonight, Hippie? It’ll be my treat.”

“Man, you know I don’t eat that stuff. It’s bad for you,” says Hippie. I’ve never seen him eat a doughnut. He might drink a cup of black coffee, but he’ll never have a doughnut.

“Yes, that’s probably why you’re in such tip-top shape,” says Smokey. “I should take after you, and quit eating these deep-fried bites of heaven.”

“Or maybe there’s something he isn’t telling us,” I say. I know I’m being disrespectful, but I don’t care. “Maybe there’s something he does to keep so healthy. It might be nice if you told us what you do to keep so healthy and young,” I say.

“Vitamins, wheat grass, and all that other groovy stuff. The usual things, like everyone else,” says Hippie.

“Not me. You won’t catch me going near that stuff,” says Smokey. “But what about the Beat? Do you think he eats only his wheat grass and all that other groovy stuff they have at the health food store, to keep himself feeling young like you.”

Hippie doesn’t answer.

“Maybe you don’t understand what I’m asking,” says Smokey. He seems to have lost his appetite and puts the bear claw down on a napkin in front of him. “The Beat has been a villain longer than I’ve been alive, and he can still kick our bunny tails any time he wants. Doesn’t that seem strange? The Beat should be collecting a pension check, and yet he seems young. Don’t you think?”

“Hey dude, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says the Hippie. He starts to get up. “Maybe we should get back to work.”

“Why don’t you sit down and answer my question?” asks Smokey. “I want to go out on patrol. Sure I do, and so does Val, but I don’t think I know what’s going on. I want all the facts before we meet up with the Beat again.”



“You don’t have the clearance,” says the Hippie in a commanding voice that surprises the two of us. “Members of the Auxiliary Corps aren’t high enough in the command structure. It’s all A-1. Top-secret stuff. That’s what the man says to me. It might even go higher.” The Old Hippie doesn’t seem like a frail old man anymore. Now he seems vibrant, forceful. “You’re going to have to trust me. That’s all I can tell you. I’m not allowed to say anything else. But you can trust me.”

“I don’t know if I can,” says Smokey. “I might have trusted you before Daphnia got killed, but now I’m not certain I should trust anyone without knowing what’s going on.”

“Sorry, old friend,” says Hippie. He gets up and leaves the doughnut shop without us.

I try to get up to follow him out. Smokey reaches across the table and grabs my shirt. He lets go of it quickly and says, “Sit back down. He doesn’t want us with him right now. He’s mad at me. I pushed him too far. I knew beforehand he would’ve said something if he could. But he can’t tell us. So that means there’s something going on they don’t want us to know.”

After waiting a bit, we get up and leave the Tim Hortons. I know Smokey doesn’t stay mad too long, and after a few minutes, I know he’s no longer upset with me. I don’t know if he’s quick to forgive or if he forgets quickly, but it’s in the past now. In fact, there’s only one thing he never forgets: his nemesis, The Fire Starter.

We walk a little while by ourselves before I speak up again.

“Do you own a house?” We’re continuing our patrol, our usual

route despite it only being the two of us. We're walking down Richards Street, and I can see our city's municipal building. Its marble columns will be lit by electric lights for a couple more hours before they shut them off at midnight. "I've never been to your place, you know. In fact, I've never been to anyone's home from the Corps."

"I haven't either," says Smokey. "It's just not something we do. Our lives at home are our own. That's why we meet in the diner. It's our office. But our homes are private." He stops walking and looks at the municipal building standing in front of us. "Maybe we're like this building. We're so lit up at night because the public feels they need to shine a bright light on us every chance they get, but when we go home we need that light turned off because it gets too bright. It's sort of sad when you think about it. We go home to lonely places during the day because we can't be with our own kind. It would suffocate us, and there wouldn't be any air left for us to breathe, not even a mouthful."

"It is sad," I say, and I realize I don't like living by myself anymore, but I know I can't return to Grandmother's house to live. I need a place of my own, and I want someone to share my life with.

"We're lucky though, you know," Smokey says. "We have the Auxiliary Hero Corps. We have our training. Those old guys like the Old Hippie—they didn't have anything when they started. You don't know the burdens they had to face. They're all gone now, and Hippie is the last one standing."

Smokey pauses and looks down the street. "I remember when I was a kid: the world was full of veteran crime fighters from the Hero Union Corps. Those people were heroes from as far back as World War Two. But they're all dead now. The H-Bomb radiation played most of them out, or maybe it was all those packs of cigarettes."

The night is getting cold, and I want to get back to my apartment and get some sleep. Spike is walking alongside us tonight. ; I've been trying to stay better prepared after what happened to Daphnia, and And even Spike looks like he wants the night to be over with.

"How old are you, Smokey?" I'm thinking about the old heroes.

“Those Union Corps guys you’re talking about . . . Weren’t they like, really ancient?” I gave him a funny look.

“I’m not that old, but I do remember watching them on TV,” says Smokey. “There was Captain Might, he was my favorite and the Scarlet Hound. She was sexy—great legs. Both of them were overly self-righteous, though; do-gooders. Have you ever noticed that the heroes who wear tights are always the most self-righteous ones of all? If you ever become a Super, please don’t wear tights.”

“I don’t know if I’m even going to make it out of the Auxiliary Corps, let alone have a Hero’s name,” I say. “Sometimes I just want to move back home with my family. I miss living in my grandmother’s house, and I miss my brother and my sisters.”

“You aren’t the first hero who’s ever wanted to live with his family. But I’m afraid it never works out. They can’t, and won’t, understand you. Heroes are always in danger, and you don’t want to bring that danger home to the ones you love.”

We catch up with the Hippie before our patrol is done. I really didn’t think we’d see him again tonight, and I’m surprised to see that he’s getting hassled for a second time. At first, I think it’s more drunks from a bar giving him a hard time, but then I realize it’s something else. He sees us, and he seems relieved. He tries to walk back toward us, but there are three men blocking his way.

“We want something from you,” I can hear one of the men say. The men are all dressed in black leather jackets, black pants, and black shoes. I nudge Smokey with my elbow when I realize who they are. These aren’t any normal hoodlums.

“These are hired thugs,” I say to Smokey, but I’m mostly just thinking out loud. “They must be henchmen. Henchmen . . . That can’t be. In our city? Does that mean there’s a Super Villain around? Henchmen always work for Super Villains.”

Smokey doesn’t say anything because he hasn’t the time. The larger henchman has grabbed Hippie by the collar of his old sailor’s jacket.

Something else is going on, and my first thought. This is another ambush! The Old Hippie is vulnerable, and the trap has already been

laid. Hippie wouldn't have been there by himself if we hadn't made him mad earlier. Had whoever laid this trap thought we'd be there too? I'm not sure, but I know we have to act right now.

Hippie isn't as slow as he looks. I hope he knows we're coming, that the two of us can help him. Both of us are at full speed, and I can see that two of the thugs have knives, while the third still has Hippie in his grip.

Hippie produces a burst of energy; it's a different energy from his LSD, and it's sudden and quick. The force of the blast is so fast and powerful, it not only knocks down the three henchmen but Smokey and me as well. I shake my head, get up, and my ears are ringing. I can't focus. My vision clears, and I see that the only one standing beside me is Hippie. Even Spike is lying on his side. I try to say something, but it doesn't sound right in my head. The blast really shook me up. It takes me a minute to regain my bearings.

My first thought is that the three henchmen are dead. They look like fish that's been blown out of a lake by dynamite. They aren't going to get up anytime soon, anyway. Hippie has defeated them.

I wobble on my feet, and I think my knees are going to give out. Hippie comes over to help me, and he says something, but I can't make it out. My hearing still hasn't returned. I look at my hands, then yell at Spike. I guess he can hear well enough, because it brings him around, and he stands up also. Finally, slowly, my hearing returns, and I hear Hippie say, "Wasn't that cool? I haven't used the Whammy Blast in a long time. I didn't think I still had it in me."

"Are they dead?" I ask Hippie, pointing at the three henchmen.

"Nah, but they're going to have a big headache when they wake up," he says. "One of us should call police dispatch and have these guys hauled away to the station."

Smokey is finally back on his feet as well and makes his way over to us. "Is everyone okay? Hippie, I think you must have used the double whammy that time."

"They got me mad. I'm not usually like that, but they got me really

angry,” shrugs the Old Hippie. He isn’t mad any longer, though. He has a really relaxed smile on his face.

Smokey says, “Hippie, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you about the Beat.”

“No, I’m sorry,” says Hippie. “I shouldn’t have been a total downer, but sometimes I get so mad. Sometimes I get tired of all the rules we heroes have to follow. There’s just too many of them.”

My legs aren’t yet entirely steady, and I’m still having problems hearing clearly. My ears feel like I’ve been standing behind a jet engine. As I try again to shake off the aftereffects of whatever Hippie did, I notice something.

I had thought this battle was finished, but it looks like another has already begun.

“Smokey, look over there. Who’s that?” The three henchmen still haven’t moved, but another figure is running toward us.

It’s the Beat.

He’s dressed in his usual black. It seems to me he’s even blacker and bigger than I remembered from the night he killed Daphnia. He immediately starts to speak, a verse by Allen Ginsberg, and I know this has all been planned. It’s an ambush, and the henchmen were merely a distraction. I don’t know whether the Beat counted on Smokey and I showing up, but he laid a trap, and we were the ones who stepped into it.

The Beat isn’t by himself. I’ve never seen the other villain before, but I’ve heard of him. He’s a villain only mentioned in hushed voices because he’s the kind of demon only spoke of after a nightmare. The Black Shirt. He’s been around forever, a true original foe of the old Hero Union Corps. He even fought Captain Might and the Scarlet Hound. Some thought he had fled to Argentina, but most thought he had just gotten old and died.

Apparently not.

The Black Shirt is considered a Super Villain. He’s far too powerful for someone in the Auxiliary Hero Corps to deal with. In 1960, the Israelis sent their own heroes, MHC, to find him in South American

and bring him back, but they weren't successful. He ended up killing those sent to kill him. He's the type of villain who fills the nightmares of guys like me.

They're about two hundred yards away. The Black Shirt is running beside the Beat, who are still spouting one of his poems, but lucky for us, he isn't spouting it loud enough for us to hear. Or maybe we can't hear it because the effects of the Old Hippie's Whammy Blast still have our ears ringing. But I'm pretty sure my hearing is okay and almost normal.

"This isn't good," says Smokey, stating the obvious, but I know it's something he wants to say out loud.

"Are they coming after us?" I ask.

"No, don't be stupid; they want Hippie. The Beat wants him dead," says Smokey.

They're within a hundred yards now.

"We're outclassed." It's my turn to state the obvious. Maybe it's time to quit letting words come out of our mouths that don't really have a purpose. Not like the Beat's words, which very much do have a purpose. His words are used to harm, to maim, to kill.

After the last encounter, the Beat must have realized that he isn't powerful enough to defeat Hippie on his own. Hence the friend. I wonder how he recruited the Black Shirt to help his cause.

"Is it really the Black Shirt?" I ask.

"I don't know for sure, but it must be him. And he's got to be really old," says Smokey. He hesitates before speaking again. "This isn't right. Something isn't adding up."

There's no time to discuss it. It's time to fight, to shut up and get ready for action.

They're fifty yards away.

Spike is already at my side. I don't have to tell him where the action is: he's facing the two villains and growling. I know he's itching to fight. My shirt is already off, and I get the Tomcat ready.

Smokey stands next to me, still removing his own clothes. I can see the black fur already overtaking him, and I know the transformation

will rip his clothes to shreds if he doesn't take them off quick. Just as I have to free the tattoos from my skin before I can attack, Smokey has to transform change into his bear form.

Once transformed, Smokey is big, about the size of his cousin, the wild grizzly. Spike stands next to him, and the two of them take off. They close the distance between themselves and the two villains, who quickly split up. The Beat continues to race toward Hippie, while the Black Shirt turns to meet Smokey and Spike.

The dog and the bear are quick, but the Black Shirt is ready for them. He pulls out his swastika dagger, and the reflections in the blade hold my gaze.

Hippie knocks me in the shoulder, and I snap awake. "Go help Smokey," he says.

"But—" I say.

"It's cool. Smokey needs your help more than me," says the Hippie with a smile, and it's enough for me to trust him and go to Smokey.

As I race to join the action, Smokey rushes at the Black Shirt. The Nazi charges to meet him, and the bear's giant claw takes the first swipe. The Nazi pulls a large shield, imprinted with an ugly swastika, from his back, and he's fast enough to block Smokey's blow. But the bear-man is strong, and the Black Shirt stumbles backward, almost falling down. The shield may be protecting him, but the force of the bear's powerful attack still pushes him backward.

Smokey continues to press his attack and roars in frustration each time the shield keeps him from reaching his prey. Sparks fly from the Black Shirt's nasty shield every time Smokey's claws strike it.

In the face of this assault, the Black Shirt can only defend, and he's gradually getting pushed farther and farther back. I think that Smokey might be trying to get him far enough from the action that one of us might have a chance to attack the Beat.

I know I should keep moving while the Black Shirt's attention is concentrated on Smokey. I have the Tomcat in my hand, but I won't use it while Smokey blocks my line of sight. Spike stands next to the action, ready to attack, and I can tell he can't wait to sink his teeth into

the villain. But it's dangerous for him to be so close. He waits for my command, and I'll give him a quick whistle when I'm ready.

Smokey swings wildly, throwing himself off balance, and for just a moment his attack lapses. The Black Shirt seizes the opportunity to counterattack. He sees Spike, and as quick as my dog is, the Black Shirt's dagger is faster. I can only watch as the blade strikes him, and then I hear Spike yelps, and I fear he might be dead. Impulsively, I take aim with my Tomcat and fire at the Nazi, but the bullet glances off his protective shield.

Smokey pauses to look back at me, and the Black Shirt takes advantage. He throws another dagger, but this time it's aimed at Smokey. Fortunately, the blade isn't long enough to penetrate Smokey's fur, and it falls harmlessly to the ground.

I run to Spike to see if there's anything I can do. I'm relieved when I see that he's still alive. The blade has struck his leg. I touch him, and luckily he has enough life left in him so that he can return to my skin. Making my dog a tattoo again won't heal his injury, but at least it will keep him out of harm's way for the time being.

I want to attack The Black Shirt for what he's done to my dog, but with what I've just seen, I realize that I'm not equipped to fight the Super Villain. If anything, I've only served to distract Smokey, who was otherwise holding his own. I decide to change tactics: I'm going to save the Old Hippie from the Beat. I know I'm going to violate the Corp's precious code, but there's no one that's going to stop me.

The Black Shirt strikes back at Smokey with his shield. I have the Tomcat out again, and I'm going to try to go around and reposition myself behind the Beat. I'm not as fast as Smokey, but I'm younger, and my legs have recovered. Smokey sees me moving away and instantly resumes his attack on the Black Shirt.

I sprint, and as I approach, I see what the Beat is doing to the Hippie. The Beat's words have taken hold, and the Old Hippie is no longer standing on his feet—he's down on his knees. The Beat's poetry is crushing him.

He's composed a new poem. And somehow I know that he wrote

this poem to kill the Hippie. I know that when the poem is complete, the Old Hippie will be dead.

I take aim and fire. My first shot is wild, and I know I'll have to slow down and take aim if I have any hope that one of my bullets will find its target. I stop, steady my hand, and prepare to squeeze the trigger. I'm going to kill the Beat, and then I'll go back and see if there's any way I can help Smokey fight the Black Shirt.

I feel the knife enter my back by my shoulder. I don't have a layer of fur to protect me like Smokey, and I drop the Tomcat. I don't know if the Black Shirt waited for me to stop running before he threw his dagger, or if he just got off a lucky throw while he fought off Smokey.

What I do know is that there's silence, because the Beat's deadly epic poem is finished.

Smokey and I have failed our friend.

I turn to face the Hippie. He lies still on the ground, crushed to death under the weight of the Beat's foul verse. Another friend, taken away from me by this villain.

I turn again to look for Smokey. He's there, but the Black Shirt and the Beat have disappeared. They could have killed us too, but I guess they only wanted Hippie.

I reach back and pull the blade from my back. My nerves scream, but I don't even feel it. My thoughts are too consumed by my defeat. By the loss of my friends. Daphnia. Hippie.

On my arm, Spike howls.

I join him, baying like a fool at the dark sky above.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ONE

***Channel 57 – KXVV
Paid television commercial for the 1:05 pm time slot.***

Narrator: How much are you due for your pain and suffering? If it were my loved ones involved in a car crash, I would only want the very best on my side. Lawyer J.R. Smith, he's on your side. Auto accidents, bankruptcies, tax problems, and unconstitutional detainment and harassment by the Hero Corps, or even worse, those pesky amateurs at the Auxiliary Corps. Remember J.R. Smith. He's on your side when you are injured by a hero.

Man: J.R. Smith, he got me \$100,000!

J.R. Smith: While I may not get everybody \$100,000, these settlements are not typical.

Woman: J.R. Smith told me everything was going to be all right.

J.R. Smith: Everything will be all right if you let me work hard for you. I know superheroes aren't super to everyone.



There are holes in everyone's life, even mine. Holes that can penetrate a man's flesh. How many can be collected into must be endured in a lifetime before you die? I know the first hole in my life opened up the day my father left our house for good and abandoned my mother, and, of course, me. More recently, I feel holes left by the death of Daphnia and the Old Hippie are other holes.



News came down from the Corps' headquarters. Smokey and I would take a paid week off while they did an investigation on their own. The death of the Old Hippie was a big defeat for all of us in the Corps. After answering all the questions of Corps investigators, I knew I wanted to get away. There was only one place to go, and the next morning I went back to my grandmother's house. I wanted to see her, to sit in her kitchen, to eat her food. I wanted to see my brother and my two sisters, and I hoped they wanted to see me also as well. It was time for me to go home, and I felt there was nothing left for me in the whole world but to go back and to stay with them.

My grandmother will make me my favorite, enchiladas, and I will sit at her kitchen table and watch her cook them. When I ask if she needs help, she won't let me, but she will tell me there will be plenty of dishes to wash later on, and I know she'll keep me busy late into the night until her kitchen is clean.

Anna says to me, "Rudy thinks he's a man and that he can do whatever he wants. He stays out late, sometimes all night long, and he does as he pleases. I'm hoping you would talk to him or something. I don't think Grandmother sees what he does anymore. She has selective blindness when it comes to him."

I think Anna is wrong because Grandmother used to notice everything I did wrong when I lived there. My grandmother used to get angry at me every day.

Now that I'm home, and I don't want to get caught up in my family's drama. Rudy is at the age where he won't listen to anyone, including me.

The enchiladas smell good, and I like their intense spiciness in my nose. I could smell them as soon as I came home. When they're ready, we all eat them together, and I wash down the enchiladas with my grandmother's tea.

After everyone has gone to bed, I go downstairs with Spike. My grandmother is still awake, and I know it's because she had something she wanted to tell me. I wait for her to say something while I eat the leftovers.

She's given me some of the leftover chicken scraps that hadn't made it into her enchilada sauce, and I feed them to Spike. The dog eats until he's full. He'll sleep in the corner of the kitchen, and I wonder if Spike dreams of chasing chickens like normal dogs do. After a few days at the vet, he is recovering from the knife wound, but I'm still in pain. The ER doctors are always the same, and they told me I'd almost died from the knife the Black Shirt had thrown at me.

"So what is up with Rudy?" I ask my grandmother as I finish eating. I get up and start to wash my dirty dish and fork in the sink. She starts to put away the rest of the leftover enchiladas, casually noting that there are plenty of leftovers for tomorrow. When she's finished with that chore, she grabs a dish towel and starts to dry the dishes I have finished washing. My grandmother is much shorter than me. She is one of the smallest women I know.

"Nothing is up with him. He's at an age when boys don't think they're boys any longer. He thinks he's a man, but he doesn't know how to be one yet. He stays out too late with his friends. But his friends, they're young too, and they are trying to find their own way in the world."

I'm about to reply when she cuts me off. "Don't you say anything to him? I didn't tell you anything," she says, handing me one of her yellow dish towels that isn't as colorful as it used to be.

"Make sure you wipe out the sink, too," she says firmly. She

remains standing next to me, and while she's much shorter, she seems as powerful as any hero I have been around. I think to myself that there aren't many villains who would mess with her. She continues, "Did you listen to me when you were his age? Do you listen to anyone now?"

"No," I say, resigning myself to the truth.

"There you go. I do my best, but some things have to be learned with age and experience. If I were to ask you anything, my question to you is why didn't you go to university? That's my question, Mister Superhero."

"I'm not a hero yet, and college...no, Grandmother," I say, stammering. Speaking with her makes me feel sadder than I want to feel sometimes.

"You should be the one to telling Rudy he needs to come home at a decent hour. You should be the one to telling him to attend to his studies at night instead of being out with his friends. Even so, I don't know if he'll listen."

"Yes, Grandmother," I say, leaning over to kiss her before she goes to bed. I know Spike will want a walk. The dog will enjoy the many new smells in my grandmother's neighborhood.

After I walk Spike, I sit at the kitchen table. The dog lies next to my feet. I thought I'd wait for my brother, and when it seems I can't wait any longer and I have to go to bed; Rudy comes through the back door.

"Is this my brother, the hero, sitting at our kitchen table?" asks Rudy. He's happy to see me, and I'm also happy to see him. He's bigger than the last time I saw him, and that was only a few months ago when I was at home for Christmas.

I feel guilty for not seeing him more, and I almost wish Rudy was upset with me instead. I wouldn't blame him if he was, but I know by the tone of his voice he's not.

I try to stand and hug him, but Rudy is having none of it. He avoids me and goes to the other side of the small table and sits at the opposite end. He says nothing, and he waits for me to sit down with him.

Grandmother kisses Rudy and then me, and tells us she's too tired to stay awake any longer. She must go to bed now but tells the two of us

not to stay up too late because she has jobs for the both of us in the morning.

After she leaves, Rudy says, "I'm not a child, and you don't need to wait up for me." His legs extend out from underneath the kitchen table. He's trying to sit as far away from it as he can.

I say, "You almost look taller than me. No wonder Grandmother complains she has to buy new clothes for you all the time."

He says, "I don't need her help, and I buy all of my own clothes. I can buy everything I need."

"I can see that," I say. "She's worried about you. She knows you're getting older, but she still worries about you. She has raised all of us, and I'm sure she'll never stop worrying no matter how old we get."

"She worries about you because you are a freak," says Rudy, trying to make a joke, but I know he thinks it's true. "You and all of your freaky friends are the ones getting into trouble. My boys don't go out and mix it up every night with the spandex heroes. She doesn't want to see us dead."

"You know it's different for me. I don't have a choice. It's my job."

"We all have choices," he says. Now he seems more interested in talking to me, but he also wants to be mean. "You may be a freak and run with all those wannabes every night, but it doesn't mean you have to. You can quit. You could come home. Get a normal job like everyone else."

I know what he wants now, and I know I want it as well. I wanted to come home, but I also know it isn't possible. As soon as the investigation is finished on the deaths of Hippie and Daphnia, I know I'll be back out on the streets again. I'm even taking a chance being here right now. It's rare for an Auxiliary Corps member to have a villain attack his family, but it wasn't unheard of. For me, trouble seems to find me no matter what, and it didn't matter if I was at home or not.

Rudy moves his chair closer to the table. "I want to join the Auxiliary Corps, too. I have talents they need. I don't want to be ordinary."

I've always suspected how good a runner he is, but I never thought it was because of an ability. While I'm not slow, I'm by no means the

fastest one in the Corps. It must have been after Rudy's sixteenth birthday that I noticed he could run faster than me. In fact, that wasn't uncommon for those of us in the Corps because that's usually when we first become aware of our abilities. I simply hadn't put the pieces together in my head.

"How fast are you? And didn't you just make fun of me less than a minute ago?" I ask, still thinking over the surprising turn in our conversation. I had waited up for Rudy to talk to him about his behavior, but if I were to guess, it was Rudy that had wanted to talk to me all along.

"I'm fast enough," says Rudy. He reaches for the old sugar bowl in front of him but then pulls his hand back. "Let's put it this way. I'm as fast as I need to be. I'm faster than any man, and I might even be faster than Spike, but I'm not faster than a car. I've run past one of those neighborhood radar detectors...let's just say I'm quick, and I always manage to win."

"I knew you were fast, and that's why you always play the forward position in your soccer games, right?" I ask. I focus on Rudy's chin, and I notice it's my father's chin and even has a little dimple in it. I wonder if he remembers our father. I don't think he does. He was a baby when he died.

"I would have thought it was obvious," says Rudy. "I play forward on our soccer team because if the pass is right I can always beat the defense to the ball. In soccer, you can be fast, but not too fast. If you're there too soon then you're off sides. I'm fast, but I'm not fast enough where a referee can't see me."

"Really? So why are you telling me this?" I ask, feeling like the only thing I'm doing is asking Rudy questions. He's telling me all of this for some reason. I decide I'm not going to say anything. Rudy is one of those people who likes to keep talking once they start, and at this point, it's better not to interrupt him.

"I got to thinking that I never lose. That I must have an ability like yours. It has to be his ability. I got to talking to my friend Gustavo, and he thought the moles on his skin were his ability. He thought his moles would get him into the Auxiliary Corps."

I don't say anything, but give him a puzzled look, and he notices the expression on my face.

"A mole? On the skin? Yes, he wanted to know if the moles gave him a special power," says Rudy. "He claimed the moles on his back blocked satellite, TV, cell phone, and Wi-Fi reception signals. He also claimed the moles on his right arm could cook food as good as a microwave."

"Is this Crazy Gustavo you're talking about? Didn't he live on Morris Street? You told me he used to give the tourists a hard time in Yaletown. I was always afraid he might make one really mad someday."

"Yeah, that's him," says Rudy. "We tried putting a hotdog next to his arm to see if it would cook but we didn't have any luck. It was still cold after thirty seconds, just like it had been when we took it out of the fridge. Then Gustavo eats the hotdog, saying it tasted warm enough for him. Well, nobody believes him, and then someone else goes into the cupboard and gets out a bag of microwave popcorn. We place the bag on the counter and then Gustavo places his arm right next to the bag. We're all thinking nothing is going to happen, but we're all playing along, and I even encourage him. I say, 'Leave it there another minute. I know it's going to work.' Gustavo starts grunting and shaking, and do you want to know what happens next?"

"Please, tell me," I say. I had let out a few laughs during the story because I could picture Crazy Gustavo trying to get the bag of popcorn to pop with the moles on his arm. "Nothing happened, right?"

"I swear to God, I'm not making this stuff up," says Rudy. "He leaves his arm there for another minute, and it popped. It really did happen. Gustavo made one of those kernels in the microwave popcorn bag pop. We all jumped back when it happened."

"No, I don't believe you," I say.

"He couldn't get any more to pop, just that one. So we opened the bag to make sure it was for real, and it really did pop. I swear it did," says Rudy. "Gustavo still has it. He carries the popped- kernel with him everywhere he goes now."

I shake my head and say, "I don't know if I believe you."

"Let me continue because that isn't the end of the story. A few days later, Gustavo tells everyone who will listen he has a super power, and the Auxiliary Corps should let him join."

"He didn't?."

"Yes, he did. And then he goes down to the Corps' recruiting station and demands they should test him right away. He tells the recruiting officer he has a power, and he should be able to join immediately."

"Really? Why haven't I heard this? Is this legit?" I ask, wanting to hear more of the story. I've known Gustavo to do some crazy stuff. He was someone we hung around with when we were kids. I had lost track of many of my old friends because I didn't live in our neighborhood anymore, but Rudy still lives here and he still knows what's going on.

"Of course it happened. I was there with him. Gustavo somehow talked the Auxiliary Corps recruiting officer into believing he had an ability, and that he should be given the chance to demonstrate it," says Rudy. He's leaning back in his chair now and his shoulders have slid down a bit. His legs were always long, and he's found a spot to stretch them out to accommodate their length.

"This really happened?" I ask, still not sure if I believe Rudy at this point in his story. He has been known to tell stories that are bigger than they really are. But I'm enjoying talking to my brother, and I want him to continue. "Who was the recruiting officer at the Corps' office?"

"He didn't tell me his name, but he was old and he wore a gold earring."

"Smitty. It must have been him. Gustavo got our toughest recruiting officer. He never believes anyone when they try to get recruited," I say. I'm getting drawn into the story. "I'm sorry, please keep going."

"Well, Smitty doesn't believe Gustavo from the beginning. And he sizes Gustavo up pretty fast. He knows this guy must be a little crazy, so he tells Gustavo he doesn't need to fill out any of the paperwork because he doesn't believe that he has an ability in the first place."

"I'm sure he wanted to get Gustavo out of there as soon as possible. Smitty probably gets a half dozen of those guys in there every day."

"Sure he can. His other ability is that he can talk people into anything, and the recruiting officer wasn't immune to it. Gustavo just keeps telling him that it's true and with his powers, he can really cook food."

"I know Gustavo usually sells stolen cell phones, but he's completely nuts," I say. I roll my right shoulder back and try to take the pressure off of my back. As soon as I do, I'm ready to listen again.

"Well, Gustavo brings his own bag of burnt popcorn with him, but even the recruiting officer isn't going to let Gustavo use his own food. But Smitty doesn't have any popcorn, so instead, he grabs some Chinese take out from the night before. Smitty brings that out for him and tells Gustavo to heat it up because he's getting hungry."

"Gustavo tries to heat the Chinese takeout, but it isn't going the way he hopes. Five minutes pass and the food isn't any warmer. Ten minutes pass and Smitty starts to tell him that not everyone has a power and it's okay because not everyone has an ability and they live perfectly normal lives. He's trying to let him down gently."

"But Gustavo just doesn't give up. Pretty soon, fifteen minutes have passed and still nothing. The recruiting officer tells him it's time for his break, and his time is up."

"Gustavo must have given one last push, found strength someplace because that's when it happened," says Rudy. "I was really feeling bad for him, and I reached out and touched him on the shoulder. I told him, 'Hey man, it's going to be all right.'"

"But I can't break his concentration, and he's not listening to me. I look at Gustavo's face and he's not going to give up. I hear the recruiting officer say something, but I don't know what he says, and then that's when I smell it. It was burnt Chinese food. The whole box of Lo-Mein had caught fire. It wasn't like it was fireworks, but Smitty had to go and get a fire extinguisher to try to put it out."

"That was only the beginning because he kept going, and he kept

cooking the Chinese food. He starts pulling all of the electricity out of the room and his energy is being fed directly into the Chinese food.

"It freaked me out. Gustavo draws starts drawing the electricity out of the power sockets in the walls, out of the light bulbs, out of the computer, and I think he even took it out of my cell phone. The whole room goes pitch black, and all I can see is the burning box of Chinese food. At this point I'm scared, and I jump back. I look and now Gustavo is glowing. He lights up the room from all of the electricity he's absorbed into his body. Smitty comes back with the fire extinguisher, but he won't get any closer in case something else happens. It was really amazing. You should've been there. Who knew he'd be like a sponge? He was a sponge for the electricity. Sometimes I still don't think it really happened. Anyway, it takes a few seconds for the lights to come back on, and that's when Gustavo can't hold on to the electricity any longer, and the electricity starts coming out of his fingers. It made him look like a Mr. Wizard or something, lightning bolts flying out of his hands. But I can see Gustavo is scared. I know something like this has never happened to him before, and he can't control it. I dodge a couple of them and so does the recruiting officer," says Rudy. "Luckily, neither one of us got killed." He looks over to the kitchen sink.

"I never heard about any of this. What happened next?" I ask. I can see that Rudy is still gripping an old dish towel he found on the table. He has its ends in both of his hands, and if it had been a chicken he would've twisted its neck clean off. He must have been scared just thinking about it. I'm still thinking about my brother going to the recruiting station with someone he wasn't really friends with. Rudy has always been a planner, and I wonder why he'd gone with Gustavo.

Rudy continues, "Like I said, I dodged two or three lightning bolts, and so did the recruiting officer. They were flying everywhere. But the last bolt hits Smitty's computer and it was strong enough to knock it off of his desk and smash it against the floor. Well, by that time a few of the big boys in the back had come running out. They had their guns drawn and they see Smitty under his desk, me in the corner, and finally, they

see Crazy Gustavo standing in the middle of the room shaking like a scared puppy.

"The lights have come back on. There must have been a generator in the back," says Rudy. He has a worried look on his face.

If I were to ask him directly he wouldn't have admitted he had been scared, but I think I knew my brother well enough to know when he was putting on a good face.

"There are video cameras in the back; they were probably watching the interview the whole time. They aren't always sure what is going to happen at the first meeting with a candidate. Can you imagine the first time they saw Smokey change into a bear? I saw it in a training exercise, and I had been warned. It still frightened me," I say. I'm concerned for Rudy, and I wish that the Auxiliary Corps had notified me that my baby brother was at the interview with Smitty. I don't know why they didn't let me know, but sometimes their reasons weren't always clear to me. "I'm sure they were getting bored waiting for the Chinese food to do something. So why did you really go down to the Corps' offices with Gustavo? It's not like you guys are close."

Rudy looks around, and I almost think he's looking for a way to tell a lie, but no, I don't think he does. "That's what the recruiting officer asked when I came with Gustavo," he says. "He takes me aside first and tells me, 'Son, you can't go in there. These interviews with potential candidates are private. We don't know what will happen in there, and no one knows if we can keep you safe.'"

"So how did you talk him into it?"

"I talked him into it by asking him what his talent was," says Rudy. He tells me it's classified. I tell him I'm an enhancer, I can make those around me better, stronger, faster. I also told him I was your brother, and he seemed impressed. So finally he says he's curious to see for himself."

"You're an enhancer? So you can make everyone's talent better?" I ask. I never thought anyone else in my family had a talent, but now I find out Rudy has two. It has been known to run in families. There were many siblings who have talents, and it wasn't unheard of for

parents and children to have talents and abilities the Auxiliary Corps could use. Sometimes those talents were the same, and sometimes they weren't. I began to wonder if Anna and America had some hidden talents. Did my parents have talents when they were alive? Did my grandmother? I start to get dizzy thinking about all of the possibilities. "Why didn't you tell me all this before?" I finally ask Rudy.

"I guess I wanted to see for myself. I wasn't sure, but I knew it was true when I touched Gustavo on the shoulder. I guess it was embarrassing," he says answering me like a teenager.

"I guess I have always known you have had abilities, but just because you do, it doesn't mean you should join the Corps. You should do something less risky," I say.

"Nope. I'm like you. I want something more physical. I want to be special and important," he says, not listening to me.

"Would it work for me? Help me?" I ask, thinking about Spike or the Beretta Tomcat on my skin.

"I don't think so. I don't think it could help Smokey either, but your friend Daphnia, I might have been able to help her," he says. "I know the two of you were close, I'm sorry about what happened to her."

I begin to think he might be right, and his enhancing power might have helped Daphnia, but there's nothing his enhancements can do for me. He can't make my tattoos work any better. But there were others in the Corps who could benefit from his abilities, and other squads would want him bad. The more I think about it, there are others outside the Corps who might want my brother to help them. The Beat could become the greatest villain of all time with Rudy's help. There would be no one that could stand up to the powers of his poetry if he became stronger. I knew if Rudy passed his indoctrination into the Auxiliary Corps, the Hero Corps would recruit him promptly.

Now that The Old Hippie is dead, I know other patrols were moved to our section of the city. The Beat had come out the winner in both of our encounters. He had recruited the help of the Black Shirt and become a force to be reckoned with. There might be no stopping the two of them, at least not by Smokey and me.

I look at my brother, and I am determined to finish our conversation. He has grown up, and now Rudy is no longer the little boy I remember. He's a young man trying to find his own direction in life. I don't know if I can help him because I haven't even figured out my own life yet. At least I could listen to him. To get the conversation started again, I ask him, "Do you know who you are named after?"

"I guess I'm named after Papa," he says. "Just like he was named after his father. You should've been named Rudy. You're older, why weren't you named after our father?"

"I don't know why I wasn't, but you don't remember him, our dad, do you?" I ask. "He was a big man. He might have been the biggest man in the neighborhood. I think we both take after Mama. She was tiny."

"I remember him," says my brother. I don't know if I believe him or not because I know he was still a baby when Papa died. Doubtful, but maybe he does.

"He was mostly a good man, but he did have a temper. There was a time I saw him punch out the window of a delivery truck when he was teaching me how to ride a bike on the street because it had gotten too close. I don't think he was afraid of anything, but I do remember him getting mad. He was very protective," I say.

"It doesn't matter," he says. "At least you have more memories of him than I do. I don't remember too much about him. Mama, I remember plenty about her. What else do you remember about him?"

"I don't know," I say shrugging my shoulders slightly. "Most of the time I get mad at him because he's dead. It's not his fault that he was killed, but I still think there is was something he might have done to stay alive so he could've seen us grow up. Mostly I wish he was still alive and so he could have been there for Mama. I remember her crying most every night after he died. I know she was sad for the rest of her life."

"I think he would've changed," says Rudy. "Even if he had lived, I think he might have come back different somehow. A man cannot go through an experience like that and not be changed."

"No," I say back to him. "Papa was different. He loved Mama.

They had been in love with each other since elementary school. They were childhood sweethearts. I know he wouldn't have changed. He had no right to die."

Rudy interrupts, "I am not saying he didn't love her. I said he was going to be changed, different. That's the way of the world. You've have changed because of his death. The whole family has been changed. Nothing stays the same."

With that, Grandmother walks back into the kitchen. She's wearing the nightgown she's always worn as long as I have known her. It's too baggy, too long, and it's covered with flowers. "I always get thirsty this time of night. It's always an hour after I go to sleep, and I wake up thirsty. I should drink a glass of water before I go to bed, but I never do." She takes her favorite glass out of the cupboard and fills it from the tap.

"If we woke you, I'm sorry," says Rudy. "Valentine and I are too loud sometimes."

"No, it isn't the two of you. It happens to me every night, and it doesn't matter how quiet the house is or how loud," says Grandmother. "It's good to see the two of you here in my kitchen and talking. All of my grandchildren are under my roof tonight. An old lady should sleep soundly knowing everything is well in her home, but thirst doesn't care about my peace of mind. Thirst only cares about water. That's why thirst will never have any children of its own."

Grandmother is starting to sound like the Old Hippie. I never knew what he was talking about most of the time, and now I'm not sure what she is saying either.

"We'll go to bed in a little while," I say to her. I knew Anna had to get up and go work at the market on Saturday morning even if America and Rudy didn't have school the next day. It isn't fair to Grandmother or Anna if Rudy and I stay awake. Grandmother's house is an old house, and all these people in it didn't keep it any quieter.

"So did Rudy tell you his good news?" asks Grandmother. She's finished drinking the water and turned the glass over and placed it into the bottom of the sink.

I don't say anything and wait for her to continue.

"Your brother Rudy is going to be a hero also," she says with a look. She's very proud of him.

"Yes, he told me," I say. "He told me the story of him and Gustavo at the recruiting office."

"Yes, but did he tell you they are going to start training him next week?" she asks. I didn't think her face could become any more proud than it had been, but it is. I'm not sure if she saw the worry in mine because I suddenly realize that my little brother could end up like Daphnia or Hippie, dead, and I knew how if something were to happen to him, she wouldn't forgive me if I didn't keep him safe and something were to happen to him.

CHAPTER TWO

From the Midnight Show on KLN 890 Talk Radio

HOST GARRETT PYRE: Welcome to tonight's show. It's a sad day for us all. The superhero, the Old Hippie, has died in a violent attack by an evil villain plaguing our city. I am not saying it isn't a surprise but it is still a tragedy for our city.

Co-Host Marty Radius: The Hippie had it coming. I am not saying I want to see anyone die. But hey, the Hippie was old. What is the world coming to when a hero as old as him is still out there trying to fight?

Pyre: You are just not going to let me finish are you? I can't even finish my opening and you're already cutting me off.

Radius: I apologize. I was only trying to be a little rude, but I couldn't wait for you to finish. It's a crying shame, and I had to get it off of my chest. Those heroes think they can go on as long as they can still draw a breath. But that isn't true; they should have had a mandatory retirement age for guys like the Old Hippie.

Pyre: Wait, Radius...the villains don't have a retirement age. So And yet you want the heroes to have one imposed on them? That makes no sense.

Radius: Villains aren't going to listen to anyone, but heroes have a code, laws, and morals. If we make the law, they'll hold to it. They have to because they're a hero for Christ's sake. They'll sacrifice themselves if we let them. A villain knows they don't have to.

Pyre: That's the definition of a hero. Radius, you're not making any sense. Heroes sacrifice themselves for us. That's who they are. That's what they do.

Radius: This isn't making sense? Well, that tie you are wearing doesn't make sense. Speaking of ties, hey Pyre, what did the necktie say to the hat?

Pyre: I am not going to play along. I want to get back to our topic. Don't you want to get back to our topic?

Radius: Don't be a pain. Now all of our listeners will want to hear the punch line, and you won't let me get to it. It's a good thing I'm here. Let's lighten things up first. I'm not waiting any longer.

Pyre: You are bipolar...you need some serious medication.

Radius: (silence)

Pyre: I'm sorry I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I can't believe I am giving in. What did the necktie say to the hat?

Radius: That's okay, I am getting better. And my mental health isn't funny. Let me finish the joke.

Pyre: I can't believe I am giving in. What did the necktie say to the hat?

Radius: The tie said, 'You go ahead, I'll just hang around.' Get it? The tie said, hang around. With that, let's go to our first caller on line one.

Caller: Hi guys. I say good riddance; the Auxiliary Hero Corps doesn't belong around anymore. That guy the Old Hippie was way past his prime, and I know for a fact he was a freeloader on the public dime.



I have always found it doesn't take long for the world to catch up with me even when I'm trying to hide from it. I had been called back to work

earlier than I thought I would be, and now I sat across from Smokey at the Templeton. A month earlier, I had returned to my apartment. I had returned to my life away from my family, and now I am alone again and only have Spike for a companion during the day. After a month of it being just Smokey and me out on patrol, I'd gotten used to it being just the two of us.

"Eat. Eat a pancake," says Smokey to me. "They're really full of blueberry flavor. I don't know what the cook has done to them tonight, but they're delicious."

Maybe Smokey is right, and I need to eat something. So far the Corps hadn't replaced Hippy or Daphnia, and it would only be the two of us on tonight's patrol again.

I have always had a hard time eating at the Templeton Diner. It's not because the food is horrible, but I don't like eating in front of people I work with, and it shouldn't have included Smokey, but it did. The Templeton is really old. The people who work there and its customers look like they've been around since the place was built. L, which from looking around, it must have been built in the late fifties. It's the kind of restaurant that collects pictures and autographs of all the famous people that have ever eaten there. There are weathermen, hockey and baseball players from our city, and the odd assortment of local politicians and city officials. For some reason, none of the pictures are from after 1975. Maybe they got tired of hanging them up.

'Best Burgers in Town,' one of the signed photos said.

'I would drive all day for one of your milkshakes,' signed so and so. Leisure suits were a common style in many of the photos. Much more decorated the walls and my eyes couldn't focus on all of them and now my stomach doesn't want anything to eat.

It is just my observation, but the Templeton seems to have fallen out of favor with the local celebrities of our city over the years, or maybe their eating habits have simply changed. Whatever the case, our well-to-do had abandoned the restaurant. Some evenings, when Smokey and I are here, I wonder if the diner's employees ever want to leave and go work someplace else, but so far they haven't.

"I'm going to order the pancakes," I say to Smokey, despite what my stomach is saying.

"Good for you, you old cheapskate," says Smokey. "You're finally going to set free that moth you've kept in your wallet for so long. Maybe if you'd tattoo money on your skin instead of other stuff you'd never run out of it."

"It doesn't work that way," I say. I order the pancakes, but I don't order bacon or sausage to go along with them. I've been avoiding meat lately. I don't know why, but I don't have the appetite for it any longer.

When the food finally comes out, I have to ask the waitress for more syrup because Smokey used it all. I swear when I'm not looking he freebases sugar. I can't imagine how many calories he eats in a day. When the waitress comes back with the syrup, she also brings back another pot of coffee, making sure we're topped off so she can go do something else before we need any more attention.

"It doesn't seem right that they let us go out there on patrol again since we're on our own. I would have thought they'd send a replacement because we are so shorthanded. My brother is almost finished with his training, and I know he'll get assigned to a patrol soon. When I texted him this morning, he texted me back that he had no idea what was going on. I know he passed the level one training, but that's as much as I know."

Smokey grunts. I don't know if he's responding to me or if he's just full.

I say to him, trying to make a joke, "Are you okay? You don't seem very hungry tonight."

"I know," he says, moving his plate away to the edge of the table. He gives the plate one more look, but I know there's something else on his mind. With Smokey on a good night, he would keep me and Daphnia waiting for the longest time while he ordered second helpings of food. Sometimes I wondered if the Templeton could keep itself open on Smokey's business alone.

"Headquarters has let me know that we'll be getting two new people tonight. I don't know why they're not here yet, but I'm

expecting them to show up anytime. One of them is going to be your brother Rudy; he probably didn't know he was going out with us tonight. He probably thought he would be out with another patrol instead."

"Good, he'll be excited, but I didn't think they'd put him with the two of us. His talent won't help either one of us, will it?" I ask. I'm lying to Smokey. I didn't want my brother in the Corps, and I really didn't want him going on patrol with us. What if I couldn't protect him?

"I looked at his profile, and he got good marks in level one training," he says.

I lie to Smokey again, "I'm sure everything will be okay with him here. Who else is joining us besides my brother?"

"Well," he says, "I know they didn't give us another rookie. They gave us somebody with a little more experience. She's a veteran of the Hero Corps, and they've sent her to work with us. She is going to take command for the time being. You've might have heard of her, The Lady Jane."

I hadn't finished my pancakes, but suddenly I was no longer hungry. I stare at my plate, and then I look up at Smokey. I repeat her name, "The Lady Jane. Are you sure? I thought they demoted her when she had the incident on the Canal Street Bridge Bridge last year."

"Yeah, they demoted her after the incident—if you want to call it that—and now they're giving her to us. She's going to take command for the time being. I guess between the Hero Corps and the Auxiliary Corps, they don't know what to do with her either."

I look at Smokey, not believing what he's saying. First, he tells me that my brother will be joining us. Then he tells me the Lady Jane is replacing him.

"They've replaced you?" I ask, losing my focus on what Smokey just said. "Why did they replace you?" I hate not knowing what is going on. I know I should feel bad for Smokey.

He nods. "The Lady Jane is going to replace me. I guess I have messed up things really bad," says Smokey. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen out of favor. But you'll see Jane isn't all that bad."

"She's a real superhero," I say, unable to hide a hint of awe in my voice. "Heck, I remember her being on trading cards and everything. I've always wondered what happened to her after the bridge. I haven't heard anything about her in a long time. She hasn't been a part of any real news in so long. I don't even remember the last time I heard her name."

"I'm sure you remember how she got into trouble before the bridge. The Lady Jane was also a part of the kickback scandal involving the Metropolitan police. It was a few years ago. A grand jury investigated her and about a half dozen members of the Hero Corps. They thought they were on the take from the local mobsters, but there was never enough evidence to convict her or anyone else," he says as casually as if he were reading it from the newspaper he'd brought with him.

"The Hero Corps was receiving bribes?" I ask.

"No, and neither was she. She's a real hero. After the lies were all sorted out, they found she never took a penny." Smokey looks at me with a look someplace in between surprise and disgust. After a moment he says, "Sometimes I forget how little time you've been in the Corps. With all that's happened, I still need to remind myself that you are still a rookie. They may not have been taking bribes, but I wouldn't blame them if some did. With all of their fame, there doesn't come very much money. You'd think the pay would be better; that they would make more money in the Hero Corps, but it just isn't the case. They have more expectations and more risks; it's not all that great. In any case, she's not a crook. But after the night the Canal Street Bridge collapsed, those in charge wouldn't support her any longer."

I look at Smokey, not believing what he's saying. First, he tells me that my brother would be joining us. Then he tells me the Lady Jane is replacing him.

I think tonight is going to be interesting, but not in a good way.

Smokey moves on to a different topic. "And speaking of pay, the Feds say they want to pass legislation to upgrade our earnings, but with the way the economy is, there's no way they're going to give a bunch of freaks like us a pay raise. At least, that's what the public thinks we are

freaks. I have even heard from the politicians that if they could, they'd eliminate the Hero Corps and the Auxiliary Hero Corps altogether. But if they got rid of the two branches, then what would they do with a group of unemployed heroes? That would make them lose sleep, don't you think?

My world is falling apart and Smokey's words are the cause of its destruction this evening. "Have you and Lady Jane ever worked together?" I ask. My nerves are not going to be the same after all that Smokey has told me tonight."

It doesn't take long for our first surprise of the evening to show while Smokey and I were waiting at our booth. While my plate didn't hold as much food as Smokey's, I considered it a large meal, and I know I won't want to eat anything else for the rest of the evening.

"Hello, Valentine," my brother says to me. Smokey doesn't even look up. "You look surprised to see me."

I'm not surprised, and I don't answer my brother for the longest second. This It doesn't make sense to me why my brother is here, and my slow reaction must show on my face. I lie to my brother, "I'm really happy to see you. I knew you were coming."

"You don't look happy. Does he look happy to you, Smokey?" asks Rudy.

"No, he doesn't. I think your brother looks more confused than he normally is," says Smokey. He is finished eating, and he wants to pay his check.

"Isn't anyone going to let me sit down?" says Rudy, and I move over. Now he has to sit with me because there is no room on the other side of the table where Smokey sits. "I think I can really help."

"What do you know?" I ask, turning my head towards Rudy. Not waiting for him to answer my question, I continue, "We are going up against stone cold killers. If he catches you he's going to take pleasure in seeing you die. You don't know how exposed you are, and you're going to be in the thick of the fight. You're too green to know when you are in real danger." I pause and I wait a second to continue, "Sometimes when you fight someone like the Beat or the Black Shirt you don't know what

kind of surprises they might have in store. I don't know if I can protect you or not."

"I don't need your protection," says Rudy, looking someplace else.

"That just tells me how stupid naive you really are. We are a team, and we have to look out for each other and sometimes no matter what you do, we get hurt, or even worse," I say, turning and making sure I'm looking at him. I'm mad, and I don't know if I'm more angry that the Corps has placed my brother in my patrol or that nobody told me about it until a few minutes ago. I know I was the lowest ranking member of our patrol, but I think even with the short time I've spent in the Corps, they might have included me. Then again, the top tier of the Corps has a habit of not letting anyone know what's going on. "Smokey," I say, turning my attention to my longtime friend. "You should've told me something. Anything? You knew about all this and you didn't say something to me?"

"I'm surprised they even let me in on this information. But you're right, I didn't tell you, I should've. It's just with Lady Jane replacing me as our patrol leader; I think I wanted it to be her job to let you know. I messed up, and I'm sorry," he says, and he's sort of sad when he says it to me.

I'm just as stupid as my brother sometimes. I hadn't realized that with Lady Jane joining our patrol, Smokey is not only being replaced, he's being demoted. It didn't make him right, but the poor bear must have been sad about it. "I'm sorry, I'm being a jerk. I should've realized what was happening when you told me. I'm foolish sometimes, and I can't see what is going on."

"It's okay. I didn't realize what the Corps had in mind right away, but too often I'm only worried about myself," says Smokey, who might be trying to make a joke. "We work for the Corps, and when they say someone else is in charge, there's nothing that two sods like me and you can do about it."

"She's reckless. She might even be crazy," I say. It isn't going to be an easy night and we haven't even gone out on patrol yet. There are times when I know that this job is too much of a burden, and I would

be better off diving into a sink full of dishes in the back of some low-rent Mexican restaurant. How are we going to fight the Beat when we're like this tonight? I can picture my brother becoming another victim with the way things are going. The Auxiliary Corps could've made this transition easier on Smokey and me. The four of us are going to have an interesting night, and one of us could end up dead if the Beat or the Black Shirt attacks us. This would have been a good night to call in sick, but what about Rudy? I know I can't walk away because I know I have to look out for him.

When does a child stop thinking he can control his world? Is it when you find out that your mother's back doesn't really break her back when you step on a crack? When your favorite soccer team doesn't win? I remember praying for Arsenal to win because I liked the cannon logo on their shirts. I remember praying for my favorite American football team. But no matter how many times I prayed for them, they never won.

When does an adult think he can stop start controlling his world? When do you think your paycheck will be enough to pay your bills? When you punch in at the time clock at a regular job? The same kind of job that normal people work. When do you think you might have a life with a girlfriend? A wife? A house? When does a member of the Auxiliary Corps know their life isn't normal? When they finally realize that they will never have any of those things. It's on this night that I realize I can never control my world. I will never have anything normal in my life, even my dog is only a tattoo on my skin. Spike isn't normal, and neither is Smokey. Now even my family isn't normal. My brother sits next to me here at the Templeton, and there is nothing I can do for him. I had tried to steer him on the right path, to a normal life, but that didn't work. He had been drawn into my world. How can he escape when I don't know the way out of it myself?

But I will try one more time. He is my brother, and I can't give up on him even if I know somewhere in the back of my mind that it won't help. Rudy is family, and I had been taught to never give up on my family.

"I'm here to help," says Rudy indignantly. "And the way things have been going on your patrols, I would think that you would like to have some extra help."

"Get up," I say to Rudy. "Come outside with me."

"There's nothing you can't say in front of Smokey," says the hard headed Rudy.

"Oh snap, you didn't say that," says Smokey. "You better go outside, kid, because if you don't, I might throw you out the door myself. And you better listen to what he has to say. Your brother might even save your sorry rookie-fur tonight."

Rudy is surprised by Smokey. He seems calm, but there's a mystery about what really goes on inside Smokey's brain. He surprises me all the time and I'm amazed at his support for me tonight. At first, Rudy looks at Smokey, and then at me. Then he sees that neither one of us is going to put up with his smug attitude on the first day of work.

We walk to the back of the Templeton and I grab Rudy by the front of his shirt. It's the first time that I have ever done anything intentionally physical to my brother. We have never fought, maybe because I'm more than a few years older than him and we've always been too far apart in age to have those kinds of disagreements in our childhoods.

"Let go," says my brother. When he sees that I won't, he says it again, but this time he's really mad, "Let go of me."

"You're going to have to do better than that. Once the Beat sees fresh meat like you out there tonight, I don't know if I can protect you from him."

"I've had level one training, and the Corps thinks I'm ready."

That makes me laugh, and I let go of his shirt, "The Corps...they throw fresh meat like you at the bad guys all the time. Some live, but most get injured or killed. The Corps doesn't care about us." I grab his wrist this time and try to turn it, but this time Rudy is ready for me.

"I'm going to hit you if you don't stop," he says.

"Be quiet and let me see your wrists," I say.

He thinks about it, and he almost doesn't want to show me, but

when he finally turns them over I am happy to see that it isn't there. "I haven't gotten it yet."

"That's right." I had forgotten. He won't get it unless he makes it to the ceremony next month.

"Someday, I will get the Corps' tattoo."

I laugh. "Yeah? Well, the mark of the Auxiliary Corps doesn't do anything for you. It's a death sentence. Go home and be with Grandmother. Be with our sisters, but most of all stay alive. Go home."

Rudy doesn't say anything, and I can tell by his face that he isn't going to listen to me.

We wait an awkward minute in silence. I turn to go inside, and that's when Rudy speaks. "You think you're the only one who can be a hero. Well, I can be one too. I want our family to be just as proud of me as they are of you."

"If that's your reason for joining then you are just as dead as me. The Auxiliary Corps will suck you in. It will consume you until there is nothing left. They don't care. They really don't." But Rudy isn't listening to me. His mind is made up, and I see myself when I was on my first day at this job. I remember being excited about wanting to prove myself. I hadn't had someone screaming at me on my first day, and here I am giving Rudy, the brother I love, a hard time. Grandmother will be ashamed when she hears how I'm treating him.

I soften my mood towards him, "Rudy, I'm sorry. You're here to help, and it's your first night, and here I am yelling at you. I'm just worried about you, but I shouldn't be yelling at you. Darn it. Just stay close to Smokey or me. We'll make sure you're okay tonight."

"I'm really here to help. That's why the Corps placed me here. They must think I'm able to do something right," says Rudy. He looks sad, and I know that I have alienated hurt my brother.

We're both facing the same direction when I say, "Let's go back inside. I'm sorry. Let's get you through your first night on patrol. I'm sure that Smokey is waiting for us. He gets nervous when there's a lot of change. I'm sure that he's more worried about Lady Jane and you.

Smokey knows you, but he knows Lady Jane more, and she has a bad reputation.”

“Why do you think the Corps brought her back?”

“To help, but maybe it’s because she’s been kicked out of the Hero Corps. The Auxiliary Corps had to take her, and since we are their most pressing problem, they decided to put her with us. They might be thinking she could defeat the Beat, but maybe they’re also thinking that she’ll mess up again and they can get rid of her for good,” I say. We walk inside the back door of the Templeton.

We make back to the table and Lady Jane is now sitting with Smokey. When I look at her, I know there’s something familiar about her, but I know I’ve never met her before. She isn’t the person that I had pictured in my mind. I can’t pinpoint why exactly she seems familiar.

“Are you going to stand there gawking or are you going to sit down?” asks Smokey when he sees me coming back towards the table. I must have stopped in my tracks when I saw her.

“I’m sorry,” I say. It took a second for my legs to start moving again. I wanted to stay where I was and keep looking at her, but even I realize that’s very awkward. The Lady Jane moves over in the booth and she’s drinking a cup of the Templeton’s coffee. She doesn’t say anything, but I guess she must want me to sit next to her. I sit, and I steal another glance. Smokey continues to be very Smokey-like and smiles at me. I’m sure he wants to get out on patrol so he can start eating the next course of the meal his stomach would want him to eat. If we sit here and wait for the Lady Jane to start tonight’s patrol, I’m sure in his mind he’d delay his feeding schedule longer than he needed to.

“Where is your brother?” asks the Lady Jane of me when I get comfortable on the bench next to her.

I turn and look around. “I thought he was right behind me,” I say. I had been so focused on the Lady that I had forgotten about Rudy. “He must...he must be in the...”

Smokey interrupts, “I’ll look for him. He’s probably in the toilet. I

have to use the facilities myself before we go out. I'll leave you with this beautiful woman to yourself."

"Thanks, dear," says the Lady Jane to him. "By the time you come back, I will have finished my coffee and we can leave. I am sorry to keep everyone waiting." She turns to me and says, "Val, it's been awhile but we have met each other before."

"I would've remembered if we had met before."

"I don't think so. You were a baby the last time I saw you."

I laugh because I don't know what to say. I want to let her continue with her story, but Smokey shouts at us and stops her. He's only been gone for a few seconds.

"The window in the men's toilet has been broken. There's glass everywhere. Val, I think someone has taken Rudy."

I get up. What has happened to my brother? I get to the men's toilet and I look around quickly. There is broken glass, but it isn't where I'm expecting it to be. The glass isn't shattered from the outside alley. The window had has been broken by someone on the inside. Maybe Rudy. I ask, "Has Does anyone seen him?" When I don't get an answer from either of them, I leave the restroom and go outside. I don't see him right away. It takes a moment for my eyes to focus. Then I see him. I see my brother. He's sitting on the ground. I run to him.

Rudy turns he's his head towards me. I see him smile at me and he says, "I'm okay, he didn't hurt me. He just knocked me down."

My pace slows down, and I'm relieved. When I get to my brother, I offer him a hand to get up. I don't see anyone else, but I don't care because he isn't hurt.

"I think I scared him off," says Rudy, brushing himself off. I can tell he's been in a fight and he looks none the worse for wear. I'm thankful.

I smile, and. I'm happy he's alive.

Finally, he says, "*It's the Black Shirt.*"

CHAPTER THREE

From the Journal of Marcus Walker, Professor of Contemporary Superhero Culture at City College:

ALL HEROES CAN BE BROKEN into two classifications. Those who have natural abilities or super powers, and those who do not. Of those that have natural powers, sixty-three percent of them have first noticed their powers during puberty. Many of these powers are very trivial such as the ability to bend spoons, or to attract dogs, as in the case of Thurman Morrison of Des Moines, Iowa. Morrison's mother had never known of a time when there wasn't a stray dog pawing at the door of their middle income house. As Morrison got older, so did the number of stray dogs that showed up at the family's front door. Morrison's mother states, "By the time Thurman was in junior high school, he always had five or six dogs following him on the way. They even followed him to church or to the store." As Morrison got into his later teens, so did the number of dogs that would follow him. His mother continues, "It got so bad that the school asked that Thurman no longer attend, that he would have to be tutored by a special teacher instead because there were too many dogs showing up at the school building every day. The dog catchers would

even wait for Thurman to show up at school. Two or three trucks would be waiting for the dogs to arrive and then they'd take them to the pound.

There are signs that Thurman was depressed and he also gained weight. It was never determined if the increase in Thurman's weight accelerated the surrounding area dogs being attracted to him, but when Thurman's weight reached 250 pounds, the Des Moines City planner, the mayor, and his neighbors had to ask the City Council to have Thurman Morrison removed from the city. They told him never return to the municipality of his childhood.

Morrison eventually moved into a vacant farmhouse in Madison County, Iowa, but that didn't stop the dogs from coming to him. At age thirty-five, as his weight came close to 360 pounds, it was reported that over a one hundred dogs were located at his farmhouse property. Some had traveled as far as 125 miles away to reach him. Morrison could not seem to escape his powers or abilities, and on March 25, 1965, Thurman Morrison shot himself in the head. With his death, the number of dogs that were attracted to him was decreased dramatically, but it is still reported that an occasional canine can be seen lying on top of his grave in Madison County Cemetery. As for Morrison's mother, she stated, "I don't think Thurman even liked dogs."



Jane will always be a superhero. And while I've heard the accounts about the Lady Jane, they couldn't take away her abilities or her heroic nature. We had all heard about her trial, and while she had been found innocent in the real world, the Hero Corps had looked down on what she had done, and they had drummed her out.

I hope someday I might be able to move up to the Hero Corps, but the Lady Jane's dreams have been dashed. There's almost no hope she'll move back to the Hero Corps ever again. She had her one shot. Once you blow it, that's basically it.

When my brother and I finally return to Smokey and Lady Jane, it surprises me that neither one of them look like they have a care in the

world. They don't even seem too concerned about Rudy. When they finally notice the two of us standing next to them, it brings them back into a disappointing reality. There's an uncomfortable silence that lingers in the diner. It's almost as if we've caught them doing something besides just talking to each other. Smokey looked disappointed that Rudy and I had come back at all.

They're hiding something from me. I know it. The Black Shirt? Rudy?

"We should probably get going," says Smokey, but when he looks at Rudy, he asks, "Are you okay, kid?"

"Let's get you some ice," says the Lady Jane, getting up out from of her spot at the booth. "You probably won't feel that tonight, but you're sure going to feel it in the morning." After she gets a makeshift ice pack from the waitress, she tries to press it to Rudy's face, but he takes it from her and does it himself.

When the bill has been paid, the plates are taken away by the waitress. Thankfully, Rudy is going to be okay, and now the only thing left to do is to go out on this evening's patrol. There's an uncomfortable silence that lingers in the diner, and it's almost if we've caught them doing something besides just talking to each other. Smokey looked disappointed that Rudy and I had come back at all.

"We should leave," says the Lady Jane. "The Hero Corps...er, I mean the Auxiliary Corps isn't paying us to talk all night. There must be some real bad guys out there waiting for us to harass and abuse their civil rights." She tries a smile, but it has a hard time finding her face.

"Let's lawyer up, people!" exclaims Smokey trying to sound like John Wayne, trying to make a joke, but it leaves no one laughing.

It's a difficult time of the morning, and now the cold will grip all of us until the sun comes up. There will be no more warmth and I wish that I had brought another jacket along with me.

More clothing is always a problem for me because it means a more difficult time getting quick access to Spike and my other tattoos. Smokey doesn't mind the cold, and the colder it becomes, the happier he seems to get. Now that I think about it, Smokey is the opposite of

me. He hates the heat, and in the summer he had made sure our patrol was assigned nights. That kept him out of the sun and seemed to suit him. There were a few times when we did daylight patrols, but Smokey had always seemed miserable. I had always thought it had been too hot. Sure, the heat had something to do with it, but for Smokey there were too many people for him, especially during lunchtime when all of the downtown workers made it out of their office buildings and out onto the streets looking for food.

The Lady Jane and my brother don't seem to mind the cold either, so I keep my mouth shut and don't complain about the temperature. I'm wearing my usual thin zippered hooded jacket and resign myself to pulling the hood tighter and putting my hands in my pockets. There will be a time in the spring when I won't need a jacket, and for those few months. I'll be able to do my job in comfort.

The usual crowd is there in front of the YMCA Hotel on Beatty Street; they're trying to follow our city's strict laws and smoke their cigarettes outside before retiring for the evening. We know most of those who stand in front of the stairs to the old brick building. We greet a few when we walk up. A young boy with spiky hair offers me a smoke, but that's a habit I never wanted. He says, "It will warm you up."

But I raise my hand and decline, give him a smile with a polite refusal, and continue to stand next to the boy while The the Lady Jane and Smokey start to talk to the other group of men. Rudy stands next to me after a few minutes. I knew he was going to get impatient after a short wait.

"Why can't we get going again? We aren't doing much good standing here. Are we ever going to start moving?" he asks me in a tone that's getting annoying.

"Relax," I say back to him. "We'll get going soon enough." I agree with Rudy. I am colder standing here, and walking gets my blood pumping a little bit. I start to stamp my feet to get it going in my legs again. It doesn't help, but my body needs to do something.

“We should go,” says Rudy, who has had enough. “Do you come here every night?”

“Sometimes we come here when we want to get information. It isn’t every night, but we haven’t been on patrol in a while and the Lady and Smokey don’t want us to go out there blind. We have found when we have a little information it usually makes things go smoother.”

Rudy is surprised. I know it’s hard to wait, but sometimes there are bits of info are out there for us, and if we don’t take advantage of them, then who knows the consequences we might have to face. There are always dangers out there and maybe if I had been more insistent, Smokey and the Old Hippie would have taken extra precautions on the night Daphnia was killed. I think about her every day and always question my actions. I tell myself things like I should have stayed with her, I should’ve made Smokey slow down, and I should’ve insisted and made sure we didn’t get separated.

I’ve heard stories that the heroes from ancient times didn’t care about the consequences of their actions. Did Odysseus care about his men after the war with the Trojans had finished? It took him ten years to get back to his home in Ithaca and his wife, and all of his men died along the way. Sirens, harpies, and a Cyclops killed off all of his men, but Odysseus didn’t care. All he cared about was getting back to his home, and back to his wife. He didn’t look back and think, ‘Hey, I’m getting all of these poor sons of a-biscuits killed off. Maybe we should take an easier route. Maybe there are consequences if I make the gods angry at me. Maybe we should sacrifice a goat and ask for forgiveness. Maybe we should find some allies along the way.’

Nope, not Odysseus, he didn’t do any of those things. He just pointed his ship towards his home in Syracuse and it didn’t matter what the gods threw down at him. It didn’t matter what monsters got in his way. He was going to get home to Penelope and his son. He was determined to go home. No matter how many of his men got killed along the way no matter the cost.

Did Odysseus have guts? Yep. Was he cunning? Yep. Heck, yes!

Odysseus was a hero, what did they matter? While he was the way he was, I am not that way. I cared about Daphnia and the Old Hippie. There isn't a day I don't think about them and wish I could see them one more time. How much money would I pay to get them back if I could? I can't say because that's not how it works. But I don't think any sum would be too great to see them once again. Maybe that's the difference between me and Odysseus. Is that why the ancient poets sang about him, and why no one cares about our deeds? Last year I thought my path to the Hero Corps was clear and that it was only a matter of time before they would want me to join them, but now I'm no longer sure. How can I tell my little brother what is right and wrong? I know Rudy. He thinks he can chew on nails and fight anyone who gets in his way, and maybe he should be that way, strong and determined. But I'm not so sure. Because I know everything we do could get someone killed, and that would be another failure we would have to deal with. Sometimes I hope I'll become Odysseus, with a clear mind and no worries. He let his sword fall where he will, but that wasn't me, and maybe with all of my doubts, I belong in the Auxiliary Hero Corps.

But I know I still have it to me to be good at this job. I know I can't stay much longer in the Auxiliary Corps. I will move on. I hope I will move up to the Hero Corps or I'll find something else to do with my life. Maybe there's someplace the government places failed heroes? Maybe the Feds don't care and they would let us find our own way in the world?

Rumors. There are always rumors, but some of them I still have to believe when I hear them because they ring true. There are places besides the Auxiliary Corps for guys like me. Places where there could be real money earned. Some say we should go and work for a private security...I mean, mercenary army. One of them is a private security firm that helps protect the rich from harm with bodyguards. They fight in their own private wars around the world. Smitty, the Auxiliary Corps' recruiting officer, had supposedly worked for them back in the eighties. I have never asked him about it. I have also heard that Smokey freelanced for a short time, but I always thought those were rumors. In talking to Smokey night after night, there was a five year stretch of time

back when he was younger that he won't say much about. I once asked him if he had ever worked with Smitty, and if they had worked independent of the Auxiliary Hero Corps, but he won't ever talk about it in detail. All Smokey has ever said about his time with Smitty was, 'He's a good guy to have in a fight.' But Smokey won't say anything else about him, and I don't know Smitty well enough to ask him those questions.

I'm starting to get cold standing in front of the YMCA. I want to zip up my jacket even further, but as soon as I reach the zipper I realize it's already pulled as far as it can go. I will suffer silently against the cold. Rudy takes out his phone as soon as he realizes nothing is going to happen anytime soon. Like so many his age, he's always plugged into one of his devices. He's either texting, surfing the web on his smart phone, or listening to his music on it. It's been a good hour since he's had a chance to get his phone out and keep up with his friends and the latest thing in their world. When he flicks the phone awake with his thumb, his phone instantly greets him with a ping, and his friends have texted him their latest important happenings.

I'm left standing by myself because Smokey and Jane are talking to the group of young men in front of the YMCA. I can listen in if I want to, but they usually always say the same things. There was always a crime in Chinatown because it's where many low-level criminals deal drugs.

The police are only concerned with the demonstrators down at the municipal building. A tall skinny youth is wearing an old pair of jeans and they make him look ferociously skinnier and taller than a normal person. The skinny youth asks The the Lady Jane, "What are you going to do to help us? I got robbed tonight and the cops didn't do anything."

I find myself drawn to the conversation, so I start to listen and I'm drawn into the conversation.

"One of us has to leave, and I can't make him leave. I'm afraid of him," says another skinny youth, and I don't understand what he's talking about. He is standing close to his friend, who is not as tall as he is. "He waits around for us and he gives me and James a hard time. He's an old guy, but he isn't old. It happened by that old rundown theatre."

"How do you know? I don't understand, is he young or old?" asks Jane.

"Old guys don't move like he should," says the taller skinny youth. "I saw him changing his into his outfit in an alley once, back behind the diner. He must have thought no one would see him there. He's young and built strong. He is also very handsome in a street youth sort of way. Still, he looks at you with eyes that are really ancient. Those eyes don't match how young he looks."

The friend elbows him in the ribs. I think he might be jealous of the way the man is describing the superhero, and that brought him back into the story he's telling The the Lady Jane.

"He sees me and he pulls out a dagger. It was a wicked evil looking knife. I'm still about twenty yards away when he starts to turn towards me. I'm thinking, I'm dead. I am really dead."

"It sounds like the Black Shirt," says Smokey, who is too big for anyone to stand apart from, but it always seems like he's always too close. "Which place was this?"

"The Templeton Dinner...on Granville," says the skinny youth. He eases his way back from Smokey and he seems much more comfortable talking to The the Lady Jane instead of Smokey.

"The Templeton," I say, unable to help myself. "When?"

"Tonight," he says. "I'm telling you this because it happened tonight." He pauses for a few seconds to make sure that no one else is going to interrupt him so he can finish his story. "Like I said. I thought was going to die in that stinking alley, but then you saved me," he says, pointing at me.

I'm sure that I'm showing a look of disbelief on my face, and all I can say is, "Okay...?"

Then he's pointing at my brother, "You too, you saved me."

I look over at my brother and he has the same look as me, but he doesn't say anything. I know he is surprised because he looks away from his phone and stops his texting.

Smokey and Jane are the only ones who aren't surprised, and he Smokey says, "These two saved you?" Smokey asks and then he looks at

me, but I don't believe he's surprised. He and the Lady Jane are hiding something from me.

"You and that guy scared him off when the two of you came out of the back door of the diner. You saved my life," says the skinny youth.

I don't remember seeing him. I had been so focused on talking to Rudy that I hadn't even noticed that the skinny youth was around, and I thought I definitely would've noticed the Black Shirt lurking nearby. "What did Smokey say to you?" I ask.

"Smokey never said anything. Sure, he told me your story. He told me that you are unhappy and that you want to leave. He tells me these things because Smokey likes to talk. Of course, I made a few phone calls because I know Smokey, but I knew nothing about you. Smokey thinks you might stay now because of your brother, but I know that isn't enough to keep a guy like you in the AHC. He's the only one in the Corps who doesn't question himself. Smokey and maybe your brother," she says. "I haven't had a chance to speak to him, but I can see it in his eyes." She shifts her weight to her other foot because her body tires standing in the same place. "You know, I took some time off from the Hero Corps," she says.

I knew the real reason she had left the Hero Corps. She had been thrown out, but she had once been on a pedestal and she wants to preach to me. Because she has fallen so far, I keep my mouth shut and let her continue.

"I became a hairdresser. I even got my cosmetology license and everything, but it wasn't for me. I could only listen to those women and their gossip for so long," she says, and now her body weight is even on her feet, and she must feel what she's saying to me is important. "And the first chance I got to come back, I took it. It didn't matter if it was only with the Auxiliary Corps. I knew I had to come back, or else I would go nuts."

I still keep my mouth shut, and I am surprised that I have kept quiet for so long.

She continues, "I know at your age you think you know everything, and that someone like me has nothing they can say to you, but you need

to listen.” The Lady Jane reaches into her pocket with her right hand. She might have a weapon in there, but I’m not sure.

“Rudy might be enough to keep you here for a few months, but once you know think he’s safe, you’ll leave, but I’m telling you that there’s nothing out there. I know because I’ve already been there. Your brother, he’s much more different than from you, isn’t he? He’s ambitious all right, but there’s something that’s not right about it.”

“You don’t know me and you don’t know my brother,” I say, stepping forward.

“I know him. I have seen his type before. I’m surprised that Smitty is still at the Auxiliary Corps’ office. He isn’t going to be with us much longer.”

“What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything but what I said. He should have gone up to Hero Corps instead of staying in the Auxiliary Hero Corps. It’s a waste of his time for someone with his talents. As soon he figures out how to use them, he will be gone,” says the Lady Jane. “But for me...for Smokey...we will die here in the ranks of the Auxiliary Corps. Your brother, he should go to the Hero Corps before something else happens.”

“What? What is going to happen to him?”

“Nothing. Nothing is going to happen to him while we are with him. I must be getting like Smokey, and I’ve said too much again.”

I can’t hold what I want to say any longer. I can’t keep my mouth shut because I’m too mad at The the Lady Jane. She doesn’t know me, and I know she doesn’t know my brother better than me. What did she mean? It isn’t what comes out of my mouth. Instead of asking about Rudy, I want to attack her and hurt her with words. “You lie. You don’t know me, and you don’t know what is going to happen to Rudy.” I’m focused on The the Lady, and I see in the corner of my eye that I’ve said it loud enough for the Smokey, my brother, and the skinny youth to look over at us.

The Lady says angrily, “Oh, I know he’ll leave. He’ll leave because he’s more...” She stops.

“He’s more what?” I step closer to her, and now I’m close enough to be within her arm’s reach, and it must have been too close because this is when her hand leaves her pocket and she hits me. She hits me hard in the face, not hard enough to knock me down, but it still hurts.

Smokey and my brother take a step closer to me and the Lady holds up her left hand to gesture to them to stay back, but she also lets them know that she’s finished with me.

I don’t do anything but stand there feeling the pain, and I’m so confused I don’t say anything either.

“Enough talk, I’m still in charge here and we need to get moving,” she says, still looking at me and tired of our conversation. “Val, you’re on point. One block out, and we’ll see if you’re tasty enough on the hook to get the Beat to bite because he’s the fish we want to catch tonight. Let’s catch us the big one, shall we?”

I regain my composure, and I’m ready to say something to The the Lady, but Smokey comes up and grabs my shoulder. “You had your chance, kid, and you don’t want to get hit again...do you? She’ll hit you again with that blackjack she keeps in her pocket if you don’t learn to keep your mouth shut.”

The discussion is over and it’s time to go. We leave the YMCA and the skinny youth behind us so we can go and find us some real killers tonight.



I’m the decoy. I hate this plan. The rest of my patrol is a few a blocks behind me and they’re all walking together. This is a classic Auxiliary Corps’ tactic. I also know for sure it is a tactic for the Hero Corps, and it’s because it is The the Lady who has drawn up this plan. On the night Daphnia was murdered, it had been the same plan. This time I am the bait, walking in front of the others.

If our branch included flying heroes, we would have used them to fly overhead and do reconnaissance. But flying heroes are very rare, and I don’t think I ever heard of one being a member of the Auxiliary

Corps. While the Hero Corps and the Auxiliary Corps did sometimes have joint operations, we don't can't have access to a flying hero for any old reason, and there's no way we could've obtained one for tonight's patrol on such short notice.

Maybe that's why we have a Blinker tonight. They're cheap and they don't care who they work for. The Lady Jane must've requested help from the Hero Corps, but I know knew from past experience they'd send us a Blinker instead. The Hero Corps very rarely concerns themselves in the affairs of the Auxiliary Hero Corps.

The Blinker is there waiting for us. He's tall and skinny and like all Blinkers, he wears thick glasses. The glasses make his eyes look even bigger than they already are. He has his arms folded as if he's tired of waiting for us to arrive.

What is a Blinker? They are like temporary heroes for hire. The Auxiliary Hero Corps only uses Blinkers when we need them. Our Blinker recognizes the Lady Jane and shakes her hand.

A Blinker can teleport from rooftop to rooftop, which is helpful in a situation like ours. But the more the Blinker teleports, the dizzier he becomes, so we have to use him sparingly. Also, they aren't a part of either the Hero Corps or the Auxiliary Hero Corps. Are they villains? The Blinkers aren't technically villains either. The Brotherhood of Blinkers is independent and works for a fee, and everyone likes to keep them that way, apart from us.

I'm walking, and I know there's nothing else I can do to protect myself. Of course, I have my shirt off like I should, and tonight's cold doesn't have its usual bite. My senses are at their peak, and as we approach the alley where Daphnia lost her life, I am only running on adrenaline. I could've chewed on nails and not feel felt them, but I'm not nervous. I take Spike off of my chest. In a moment, my dog is ready, and if I don't get any help from my friends behind me, at least I have Spike and I know he'll be ready to help. I'm sure The the Lady Jane wants to say something about me being too nervous, and that I shouldn't have gotten Spike ready so quickly. But the Lady Jane hasn't fought against the Beat or the Black Shirt. Her plan is too simple, and

I'm the one who's out front, not her. I vow to learn some new tactics for us if I survive this evening. I know there must be a better way of patrolling a street. If I did some research, we could practice them. We need to be more prepared for situations like this.

I hear my dog growl. It's a deep, throaty sound, and I know that someone is near, someone dangerous.

"Easy, boy," I say to Spike, trying not to be nervous and feel the pain in my left eye. It's swelling now from where The the Lady Jane hit me. I know my Blinker is someplace above me, but I don't know how much help he's going to be. It's going to be a mystery even to me. I can't see anything, and I know if I were the Beat, this is the spot where I would attack.

Spike turns in a new direction. I am not expecting him to turn away from me. Instead of facing forward, he turns and looks back. I know there is someone in front of us, but there must be something else taking place behind me.

Then I hear a scream in front of me. There is something going on up there, but I don't know what it is. If Spike was on a leash, I'm sure he would be pulling me back. Then I hear a scream again, and I make up my mind to go forward and ignore Spike's warning. I don't know if I'm right or not, but I want to move. I want to go forward. It doesn't matter to me. I know the Beat likes to overwhelm the senses with his poems. It doesn't matter which way I go, but I know I need to do something because staying here is a bad idea. I then confess to myself quietly and I try to listen to the little voice inside my head. Maybe that's the worst thing I can do. I'm not going to stay here. I have to move, but my body won't let me. I keep still, I'm not moving at all.

When I was a kid, I used to play a game called 'freeze, frozen, and freezing.' It wasn't much of a game, but it did have three stages to it. If a friend yells, 'freeze,' then you couldn't move until you pretended to use extraordinary strength to break out of the last stage. That's what I need to do now. I know I need to use all of my will to move.

'Frozen' was the second stage, and if a friend tapped you on the back or punched you in the arm, and called 'frozen' then there was

nothing you could do but stand there like a statue, and your friends could run by and punch you one time.

'Freezing' was the last stage, and there wasn't anything you could do for the rest of the game even if all of your friends jumped on you, knocked you over, and punched and kicked you as hard as they pleased. If you moved, if you shouted, or even if you cried, you lose the game no matter what happened. I never cried once at this stage of the game, and I'm not going to lose this game tonight either.

I'm at the first stage of the game. I know I'm at stage one: freeze. I could move if I wanted to, but if I do, I'm in danger also. So I don't move. My dog, he's waiting on me to give him a hand signal. He'll freeze until I tell him to do something different, and I wait to give him the signal to move. That's Spike. He's one of the best heroes I know. All my dog wants to do is please and protect me, and he does so much more for me than I've ever done for him. He expects nothing in return.

Freeze, I say over and over to myself in my brain. Move and you'll die. Take a step forward and you'll die. Don't move. Don't take a step forward. Freeze, I think to myself. Freeze. I also want my dog to be safe, and I think, not daring to speak, but I think, Spike, please stay still.

This is when things change. But I act in the moment. I move. When I move, I save my life. It's no longer a game. It's time to keep moving.

I move, and I save my life. Another bullet strikes where I'd been standing. When I move, Spike moves. Maybe I save his life too because the bullet misses me and it also misses my dog.

I don't hear the first shot, and the bullet doesn't make the typical ping sound. It isn't a high pitched sound like they are in the movies, but it makes more of a loud thud sound as it strikes the ground. I haven't been shot at too many times in my life, but enough to know the sound of a bullet when I hear it. I move around a corner and hide in a shadow where I think I'm going to be safe for now.

My attacker doesn't see me anymore, and he starts yelling at me see if he can find out my new location. "My shots are not as good as my rhymes, you are not my target; you are wasting my time," says the voice

of the Beat. He's shouting across the alley, I think from on top of the building. I can see the beam from the laser scope of his rifle flash about in front of my eyes. He speaks again, "I'm not here to invade your space; I'm here to take away your father's younger face."

I'm right; he's on top of the building. If I hadn't been, I would be dead. I do something I have never done before, I shout back at the Beat. "Your poems make me think, that your breath must really stink." Okay, I am not the poet here. But I don't think it's too bad considering the pressure I am facing.

Another shot and I'm not going to leave the safety of my hiding spot. I know the Beat will see me if I leave, and I've seen enough late night TV to know I need a sniper of my own to take out the unseen killer. I don't have anyone to help nearby so I'm on my own. I think I'm too far away from Smokey and the others.

I don't know if my Blinker can see the sniper. I know he is up there, but I didn't don't know if he can see what's going on any better than I can. I'm pretty sure the Black Shirt isn't going to use a rifle to shoot at me. It isn't his way of killing, and he wouldn't want to lose the murder game by not getting accumulating enough style points. The Beat likes to use his poetry, but he also has a gun in this alley, and it's the same place where he killed Daphnia. The Black Shirt likes to use his daggers, which is something else I need to worry about tonight. There could also be one of their henchmen trying to pin us down so they can finish me off, but I don't think so. I think it's only the Beat who is up there shooting at me. How certain am I? Pretty certain.

I can't go forward towards the Beat. But I can retreat away. I can circle back around to where my friends are supposed to be. I look up, and I don't see my Blinker. Best case scenario, he's blinked himself back to Smokey and the Lady Jane, and he's now safely with the rest of my patrol, and he's helping them in their part of the fight. Worst case, he's gotten dizzy, and he's fallen off his lofty perch. I can't see him, yet for some reason I know I can only depend on Spike's help if I'm going to get out of here alive.

I retreat back to William Street. It's like I'm in a dream. William

isn't a wide road, but it's wider than the alley I had been in. Here, I am standing by myself, and I finally have some clarity in my brain. I'm also standing under a street light. An old car passes me, and its headlights light flash on me for a moment. I'm bathed in its artificial sun. Now I know what to do next. No one has called out 'freezing or frozen' in this game I am playing, and I can still move if I like. This game isn't over, and I still have options in front of me.

CHAPTER FOUR

An excerpt from the recording of Professor Anthony Hillsboro's lecture, 1996, 'Famous Heroes in History.'

SHAME HAS BEEN USED by many societies for centuries. The English scoundrel, Peeping Tom, caught gawking at Lady Godiva, was considered shameful because he was the only one who looked through the shutters of his window as she rode past clothed only in her hair.

What is curious about this story is that Peeping Tom went blind after he viewed the beauty. He could not have been the first voyeur in history, although he might be famous.

This is another of the many noted incidents in recorded history of someone with a hero's abilities. It was her husband that forced her to ride naked through the streets of Coventry. I am not telling you this tale because of Peeping Tom. I am telling you the story because of the shame that was brought on a wife because of her husband and the power of her will, her abilities.

Why would a husband do this to his wife? (There's a long pause on the audio while he waits for an answer. There isn't one from the audience, and the man continues.)

It was taxes. He was a landowner, an Anglo-Saxon, before the Norman invasion. He needed the revenue under the very corrupt inherited land-holding laws in Britain. They had been in place since the time of the Romans and they still had an influence on Britain's many tribes. His hand had been forced, and he had to increase the taxes on his land.

But his wife, Godiva, saw the effect of over-taxation on their people, so even though she went along with her husband's plan, she knew what it did to her tenants. The poverty, the starvation, and the hopelessness. This is an example of the beginnings of a superhero as we know them.

Maybe her husband thought she wouldn't ride naked. She was, after all, the wife of a lord. She was respectable. What he didn't count on was the fact that she had her hero abilities. That is why she warned all of their tenants to stay inside, to close their shutters, and not to look out when she rode past.



What is the question in the back of the room? Was she beautiful? There are no records or drawings of Lady Godiva made in her lifetime, but there have been countless made since. As an academic, I would like to think she was beautiful, but there is no proof one way or the other.

Yes, I like to think Godiva must have been beautiful. A real hot-house tomato, as you might say.

Back to my story. It was the shame of being naked that forced her abilities and powers. She knew, and Godiva tried to keep all those she cared for by warning them warned all those she cared for by trying to keep them safe.

Again, back to my point about shame. She showed her powers, her hero abilities. When Tom looked out his window, he instantly became blind. If the story is true, which I think it is, then we must list Godiva as a hero.

Is there another question from the back of the room? Does shame and suffering give heroes their abilities?

An interesting question...There is no proof, but I believe they're enhanced, bringing out a hero's abilities, their powers.

"Don't wait for the page to absorb the ink," says my Grandmother grandmother to me on occasion. 'Do something before it has a chance to dry!' It's her saying, and she sometimes uses it around the house when we don't know what to do with our lives.

Now is a time when I don't know what to do, but I know I can't move forward, yet I must do something. There's a sniper blocking me with his bullets in the direction I want to go. I can see there's only one more choice for me. I must go the other way.

I hear another shot, but I don't think it's directed at me. It sounds different, and I think it's from another shooter above me. It helps reinforce my opinion not to go forward. Circling back around might be a better choice for me right now anyway. I want to help the others in my patrol. My thoughts turn towards my brother, who might now be in a fight with the Beat and the Black Shirt, and I'm not helping him by standing here. Maybe Spike and I could go back to Rudy, we might be able to help him.

I retreat, but I stop when the pressure in my ears changes. It isn't a change like being a passenger in an airplane, but it disturbs my eardrums enough to make me stop moving. I look down at Spike, and he's waiting for me to do something. Nothing happens. I think it's safe.

I'm moving again, but it isn't towards the fight. I'm still traveling away from it, but this time I know it's the right path. I'm certain it is.

I hear a rifle shot from above.

I hear a pinging thud as another bullet hits the concrete, but it isn't close to me. There's a siren in the distance, but I can tell from the sound it's still a few minutes away. I know I have to move quickly before they arrive. The police and the Auxiliary Corps have a troubled past, and as soon as the police show up I know they will want to arrest, harass, or harm anyone they can, including those of us in the Corps.

I move past a newsstand in the Yaletown district where the vendor has had closed his shop hours before. I think I have four minutes before the police arrive. At least, that's the calculation I make in my brain. I

need to go and try to help my friends before time is up. I hope my Blinker is still up above some place; he can still help me if he hasn't fallen off one of the rooftops by now. I move behind the newsstand and I'm still standing there when another bullet is fired at me. It misses me, and I know one of the snipers must have relocated as well. I move because it's in my instinct to move. I also know in the back of my mind I need to stay in motion. I know the next shot might strike me if I stand here much longer. When another bullet is fired, it lands in front of me. I move to the other side of the newsstand, and I think I might be safe for a few seconds.

My Blinker appears next to me, stumbling from the vortex of his own quick relocation to this spot. He shakes and then he falls down onto the sidewalk. He's still twitching as I reach him. At first, I think he has been hit by the sniper's shot, but when I touch him I know that isn't the case. It must have been his quick transportation to me that has disoriented him, leaving him dizzy. Spike goes to him. He offers a small wall of protection, in case another bullet is fired. I check on the man. I bend down and place my right hand on his heart.

My Blinker opens his eyes and speaks to me. "What in the name of smelly fishes are you doing? I am not dead yet."

I smile, and I'm glad he's okay. I give him a hand. He takes it without complaining, and I help him to his feet.

"There's another Blinker up there and he has a rifle too," says the man who's now standing. That confirms what I'd suspected. I know there's another sniper shooting at me from above.

As my Blinker stands there, I notice that he's taller than me. He isn't as tall as Smokey, but the man does have a tall, lanky frame. He says, "' He's trying to kill you, but I think I distracted him.'"

"I was right, there is another Blinker out there," I say.

"There's another Blinker, all right." "What? Did you think I'm the only Blinker in town? Your friend with the rifle must have hired him just like your group hired me. He's up there. I saw him, and he has a rifle. But he has a weakness just like me. He'll get dizzy because he's been blinking around up there too many times. That's why he hasn't

shot you yet. But he will, once he recovers. He's trying to find a good spot to shoot you as we speak.”

I don't know what to say.

“I'm going back up there to try to distract him again,” says my Blinker. “”Maybe if I can blink-in close enough, it will work.””

“Be careful,” I say. “Don't get yourself shot.”

My Blinker looks at me and smiles. He's also older than me, and I think he must have been a Blinker for a long time. He seems to take what I say as a kind of joke. “”I'm more worried about falling off that building than him actually shooting me. I can tell he hasn't been a Blinker as long as I have because of the way he blinks in and out. He gets dizzy quicker than I do.”” He pauses before he begins again. “That's one of the drawbacks of being a Blinker. Cool teleportation, but it really messes with our inner ear.”” He pauses before he begins again and he's almost talking to himself. “”But I still like the chance to carry a gun, even though I'm always worried I'll shoot myself with it. I'm dizzy all the time, so maybe that's not a good idea.””

I think I know what he means. I can tell my Blinker wants me to back away so he can leave. I don't know my Blinker's real name, but on the spot I decide to call him Felix, and in my brain he reminds me of a Felix, I back up, and after he brushes himself off, he gives me a look like he's ready to go, then he quickly blinks away. I feel a slight rush of wind and it moves me back even more.

I'm still concerned for his safety. The other Blinker has a rifle, and he might shoot Felix, the Blinker, or even worse, get a lucky shot off and shoot me. Finally, I need to worry about Spike. He's an authentic dog when he's not on my skin, and it makes him vulnerable. A bullet could kill or hurt him. He's not a tattoo all of the time. Sometimes he's real.

There's a white flash in front of me, and I feel the wind again. It feels different. Something is different because there's more intense light in this flash, and more wind. I don't think it's Felix, but so it could must be the other one. In an instant, Spike is there trying to protect me.

I don't have time to see who it is. I need someplace to hide, and I

need to do it before he sees me in the open. I grab my dog, and we move to the other side of the newsstand. I lie down on the ground and keep hold of Spike's collar, trying to keep him as safe as I can. He doesn't protest and stays next to me.

I can't see the Blinker, but I'm sure it's the other one, not Felix. I once knew a kid I had a school yard fight with in elementary, Oscar was his name. I decide I am going to call this other Blinker Oscar.

Oscar is not far from me on the opposite side of this small building, and I'm pinned down again in this location. I try to move away, but another bullet drives me back down on the ground, and I get as low as I can. There's still another sniper above me—, the Beat—, and I have to watch out for him too.

Now it's time to do something different, and I decide to use another one of my tattoos. I still have the pistol, but I'm not ready to try the gun yet. I think to myself maybe it's time for me to get another tattoo to help me out in situations like this. Spike is the one I use the most. I still have on me the snake and the dagger. I sigh, and I still have to decide which one. I'm not sure which one I'm going to use.

I decide to use the snake. Sometimes I forget how big she is when she takes her full form. I sit up off the ground and get to my knees. I ready myself and hold the reptile in both of my hands. I'll wait for Oscar to come to the other side of the newsstand. I hope he'll walk around the corner of the small building. I will have to trust he won't see me while I'm kneeling on the ground. I'll just have to wait there long enough and throw my snake when I see him.

I'm surprised when he does exactly what I want him to do. He comes into my view, and I throw my snake at him. She lands where I need her to, and Oscar shakes, twists, and then screams as he tries to get her off. A voice in my head says it's going to take more than that to get her off of you. I know she's strong as she wraps herself around him, and squeezes Oscar. He can't hold on to the rifle and drops it. I move to the weapon and pick it up as quickly as I can.

It takes me a second, and then I'm ready to move again. I hear another bullet strike the ground. This is my chance to get out of here,

and I'll have to leave my snake behind. I get to my feet and I say to Spike, "'Come on. Let's go.'"

My dog starts to follow me, and then I see Felix flash in front of me. He's come back and I want to yell at him to get him, but I don't because I see something else. It's a gun. A rifle. And when he isn't dizzy any longer, he sees me and smiles. "Where did you get that?" I ask.

He says, smiling, "From that poet. Boy, was he surprised? He didn't notice me because he was concentrating so hard on firing at you. It was the last one I grabbed hold of his rifle and blinked away. Neat trick, huh? Hey, what's going on over there?"

I smile back at him, knowing I don't have to worry about the Beat for the time being. I turn with him to look at what my snake is doing to the other man.

She's still squeezing Oscar. I walk over to her and I touch her lightly on her scaly skin. When I do, she relaxes her grip slightly on Oscar. He can't get away, but at least she won't kill him.

She is no ordinary constrictor, and there have been times where she's wrapped herself around me when I had let her loose, so I know she's strong. I know what the man in front of me is going through. Oscar, on the ground, doesn't stand a chance, and if I'd had I wasn't so worried about Rudy more time I might almost feel sorry for the poor guy.

I relax and examine the rifle I picked up off of the ground. I see it looks cheaper than the one Felix is holding. I pull out its magazine and put it into the back pocket of my pants. I also release its bolt back towards me, and a round flies out of the chamber. I'm satisfied there are no more rounds in it. We are all safe for now. Spike returns to my side.

I let the snake hold onto Oscar for a little longer. He doesn't seem conscious anymore. I'm still holding his rifle, and while I have removed the ammo, the weapon still makes me nervous. I don't want him to have another chance. I've learned in my short career that it's better not to give the bad guys another opportunity to kill you.

Felix walks over to me and extends his hand for the other rifle. I hand it to him and he takes it and smiles. This is when I get an odd

feeling about Felix. I don't want to be around him any longer. He looks down at the man struggling on the ground and says, "Poor slob. How much longer are you going to let your pet keep playing with him?"

"I think he's had enough." I can see the man has given up, and I reach down and recall her back onto my arm where she reverts back to her inky design. I know she'll be more comfortable when she's on my skin. She isn't like Spike, and she has no hesitation as she returns to me.

Felix says something that surprises me, "Maybe you should've let your snake and dog finish him off. You know, get rid of him. It's a well-known fact we let too many of the bad guys go, and it would be better just to kill them off instead."

I say, "We are going to wait for the police. I will turn the Blinker over to them."

Felix continues, "One by one, they kill us off, but we do nothing to them. The only thing we do is put them in jail. Eventually, they all get out again." He looks at me. "You don't work with the other members of the Auxiliary Corps like I do. They struggle the same as your group does. Maybe it's time to do things differently."

"It's not our way. I like to think we're on the right side, you know, the good guys," I say, still spooked by what Felix has said. Oscar is still lying on the ground next to us and with a quick glance, I can see he's waking up. He's been out of it after losing his fight with my snake, and now I think he's going to be okay. I hope that he'll recover at the hospital.

Felix gets my attention. "They'll kill us off. It's only a matter of time before you and I end up dead. There's nothing stopping it; death is driving a big Greyhound bus, and we are all standing in the crosswalk waiting for him to run us over. You know he's coming for us sooner rather than later." I notice his skin is now looking paler than I remember, and I swear he starts to look more like the other Blinker on the ground than he had just a minute before. Has he become dangerous? He can still use his rifle if he wants to. I still have Spike next to me, but even without my dog, I am sure I can defend myself. I want to get back

to my friends, but I know I can't leave the other Blinker here alone with this man.

"Isn't he a Blinker like you?" I ask.

He says, "'No, he's not a member of the Brotherhood. Isn't that clear by looking at him?'"

"Why don't you hand me your rifle?" I ask Felix. "I'll hold it until the police and the paramedics can make it. I can take it and keep it safe."

"You can't have this other rifle," says Felix. Now I know I'm going to stay here as long as I need to. I want to make sure he doesn't try anything.

I hope that my brother, Smokey, and the Lady are going to be okay. I reach into my pocket and pull out my cell phone and place another call, this time to the Auxiliary Corps' dispatch. I tell them the important information, and when I finish, I look at the man standing before me.

This is when I notice it. I see it, and it happens right before my eyes. Felix starts to change. I'm surprised. It's a physical change. First, the color of his skin becomes lighter, like I noticed before, but his face also changes, and his physical frame even gets smaller. Felix has changed into a different man. He has changed into the one who is lying on the ground. I glance down, and I can see that the man on the ground has switched. This isn't good. My enemy is standing before me with a rifle, and the one we hired is unconscious and lying on the ground. I look at the standing man, and it's Oscar. I'm sure he's going to try to kill me. "This is interesting," says Oscar. "I'm feeling much better, and I think I'm fully recovered now. It was smart of you to take the bullets out of those rifles, but you didn't for both. I saw you do it when I was lying down there and struggling. Sometimes I don't think those of you in the Auxiliary Corps are very smart, but maybe you're just one of the especially dumb ones."

"How did you do that?" I ask, still surprised by how the two men could have changed places in front of me.

"Aye, you mean about the poor fellow lying down on the ground

there and me changing places. How did we make the switch, you mean?" asks the man. "I can morph into the other. It isn't a normal trick, and only a few of us can do it. It takes practice, but eventually, I can make it happen, and I can switch places with another Blinker."

I reach down for Spike and grab him by the collar. He's a big dog and it takes a great deal of strength to make sure he doesn't go anywhere. I want to make sure he doesn't get injured at this moment.

Oscar doesn't seem too interested in what I'm doing, but he glances at me and says, ""That must be really uncomfortable for you, to go around with no shirt on all of the time, especially this time of the year. Aren't you cold?""

"Spike," I say in a gentle voice. I'm trying to control my dog, and my dog growls at the other man. I want to protect him, and I'm glad when he settles down quickly.

"I don't want to make your big dog mad at me, or I might end up back down there again, and it wouldn't be to my liking next time. I may talk a good game, but that's for another night. I'm really glad I have this ability." He distracts himself and starts to think about something else. "No, I'm not a cold blooded killer. That's not me. But didn't you say you should permanently get rid of all of us? Didn't I hear you say that a few minutes ago?"

"No, that wasn't me, that was your friend down there," I say. "It makes you think to wonder who is in the right and who 'is in the wrong, doesn't it? I mean, I'm in the Auxiliary Corps. I'm no killer, but your coworker could easily become one."

"If he would've shot me, not you or anyone else would've known. We trust you because you're in the Corps. I always thought the Brotherhood of Blinkers to be enough, but now I'm not so sure. Oh, I shudder at the thought of what he might have done to me if you'd left us alone."

I start to worry about Spike. He's too vulnerable. We've waited too long for help to arrive and I decide to recall the dog back onto my skin. Spike is reluctant, but he eventually obeys me and allows me to touch him on the top of his head and with that action, the dog becomes a part of me again.

“That’s a neat trick. We all have our tricks, don’t we? But it’s not as impressive as my own,” says Oscar. “Blinking has its limitations, but there are still plenty of possibilities I haven’t yet discovered. It seems your friend down there is the one you should worry about, not me. Oh yes, he may not be a problem this evening, but mark my words, he’ll become a problem later on. I heard him speaking to you, and you must agree with me.”

“He was caught up in the moment,” I say, and I’m not telling the truth. “He’s not all that bad.”

“Sure, whatever you say, friend,” he says. He pauses for a moment and then he speaks again, “But it makes you wonder how much more out there think and feel the same way he does. Doesn’t it?”

I don’t know what to say; I feel relief when I hear the sirens finally coming our way. The lights are flashing and I know they are right around the corner, and m. Maybe the police will be able to help me in this situation. I know they won’t be happy, but I also know they will have to give me assistance, and that’s what I need right now.

“Don’t worry, friend, I won’t be here much longer,” he says. “I’m feeling healthier and better than ever, considering what you did to me, so let’s just keep me healthy for the rest of night. Yes, worry about the Beat and the Black Shirt because they’re dangerous. And you might, if you are given a chance, worry about me because I might be capable of causing some of my own small amounts of mischief. Yet there’s a bigger threat out there, and it’s in your own Auxiliary Corps. Believe me or don’t believe me, but it’s your problem and not mine. There’s a real threat and you don’t even see it coming. You’re dumb blind to it, but so was I to most things in the world when I was your age.”

The headlights from the ambulance lights the area where we are standing. I turn my head to see them approaching. The flashing lights and the noise from the siren fill the whole space between the buildings on this street. A patrol car closely follows the ambulance, and I know I will have to spend the rest of the evening answering questions and making statements. When I turn back to look for the Blinker, I see he has disappeared. I’m still surprised even though he told me to expect it.

I hope my friends and my brother are all okay. Standing there by myself, I have plenty of time to think about what the other Blinker had said to me. I don't know for sure, but I hope what the villain said isn't true. I don't need to worry about those in the Auxiliary Corps turning on each other. There is too much to think about or worry about now, and I know I will spend the rest of the night being anxious.

But there's a little bit of good news to come, and when the police are taking my statement, I see my brother. He comes up to me and pats me on the back while I'm still talking to the police. He's safe. We don't need to say anything because we know each other so well, but when I'm finished talking to the patrolman, I do get a chance to talk to him briefly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he says. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I reply. "Grandmother will be happy neither one of us ended up in the hospital tonight," I say.

I also see Smokey and the Lady Jane following behind my brother. Smokey comes up to me and shakes my hand. I can tell he's glad to see me. He says to me, "Big guy, it looks like you handled everything by yourself. No one's been killed tonight and that news is good enough for me."

"I had some help from the two Blinkers," I say back to him. "Both the one we hired and the one the Beat hired."

"That doesn't sound right. The Brotherhood of Blinkers is supposed to be neutral." I continue to tell him about what happened and my encounter with the two Blinkers. It doesn't put his mind at ease.

"That's unsettling," says Smokey. "The world is changing around here, and we can't see everything that's going on. Things are changing for all of us, and we were lucky no one got killed tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

From The History of the Hero Union Corps, Chapter One, 'Heroes: Violent Beginnings'

September 5, 1943, Los Angeles police were unwilling to step in and protect civilians. One policeman was quoted after the riots saying, "You say that the cops had a 'hands-off' policy during the riots? Well, we represented public opinion. Many of us were in the Great War, and we were not going to pick on kids in the service."

The violence continued during subsequent nights, enveloping even those who had no connection to jazz or the heroes. When a group of heroes exited a local club, they too were attacked. The men were all adults, and many of them were not heroes, but ordinary civilians. Military commander Clarence Boggs reported that there were "hundreds of servicemen" prowling downtown Los Angeles — mostly on foot, disorderly — disorderly — apparently on the lookout for heroes." The Navy reported that "Groups vary in size from 10 to 150 men and scattered

immediately when the Shore Patrol approached. Men were found carrying hammock cues, belts, knives, and tire irons..."

Although groups of armed servicemen roamed the streets attacking civilians, the military seemed more concerned with regaining control over their men than with the violence they were committing. There was the negative press that would result from mass arrests. Admiral Bagley, the commanding officer, appealed to his sailors' "common sense."

Yet the heroes organized and fought back. Joseph Leyvas, 'The Falling Cat', and his friends set traps for the sailors and civilians who were pursuing them, using decoys to lure their attackers. And they let out a cry: "There they are! There they are!" And they came in. As they came in, once they got all the way in, we all came out ... I myself had my powers. And I used them."



The television drones on only for the sake of itself and it makes noise in my studio apartment. It's one of those rare nights when I'm not on patrol. I will need to walk Spike, later on, tonight after I feed him, but I want to make sure that I am rested. I like to nap on these days and I try and take it slow and easy.

It's hard to explain, but sometimes I need to be removed from my tattoos. To feel clean. To be separated from them. And sometimes I think they might need to be separated from me too.

I place my hands on them one at a time. First, I remove Spike. I touch his tattoo and he eagerly leaps down onto my bed in a very puppyish way. He wants to play, and I let the dog bite at my hands for a few minutes before I remove the rest of them.

When I finish playing with Spike, I reach for the snake. She senses the dog and moves away from him when I place her down on the bed.

Spike jumps on and off the bed for a few more minutes, but he doesn't bother the snake too much. I take the Beretta Tomcat off of my upper arm. I feel some guilt when I take my pistol off. I put it on top of my refrigerator, away from the animals on my bed. I know I should

practice more with it; maybe I should even take it to a firing range and spend time with the pistol so I can learn to fire it properly and accurately.

Except I won't, because of what had happened to my father. He died when I was twelve. He had been shot a few streets away from my grandmother's house. The police had caught the guy and it turned out the thief had shot and robbed my father for ten dollars and some change.

Maybe the Tomcat reminds me of the gun the man had used to kill my father. I have the Tomcat tattoo because it fits on my left arm and I can grab it quickly when I need to, but I think I really have it because it reminds me of his death. I've seen the police report on my father, and my pistol is similar to the one the killer used. The only reason I got the tattoo in the first place the Corps couldn't understand how someone with my abilities in transforming tattoos wouldn't want to use a firearm. I had been resistant, but eventually, I'd given in.

I fall asleep.

I hear the noise of the TV when I awake from my nap and it says, "There is something more for you today. A New Awakening." I don't think I've slept for too long, and I move closer towards the TV and look at the advertisement that's caught my attention, but it becomes fickle, like a lover, and fades away. Maybe I'm still asleep and I can't focus. I swear there are times when I should call the cable TV company and ask them to install one of their boxes so I won't have to play games with my TV's antenna any longer. I'm frustrated with its reception, but I don't turn it off.

Spike has moved to the floor, and he opens his eyes just a little bit when he hears me wake up. The snake is lying next to me on my right side. I hope she's sleeping, but I know she's really there because she wants to get as much of my body heat as she can.

There is still one more tattoo I haven't removed. It's my cross. It's my largest tattoo, and it's located on my back. My grandmother tells me I should be more religious, and maybe she's right. I take the cross off and place it next to my gun. It's heavier when it is away from my skin.

It's made of wood with traces of silver in it when it's free from me. I never show it to Smokey anymore because he's afraid of the silver it contains. He always claims to be allergic to that metal.

I'm now devoid of my tattoos and I'm finally free when I step into the shower. I notice how there is a patch of drywall that is starting to rot, and I would have to get my landlord to replace it before it gets even worse.

The water in my shower is hot, and I know I can rely on the boilers of my apartment building to heat as much of it as I need. Tonight, I am hoping to stay in there for a long time. At first, I scrub my skin hard, almost as if I'm trying to remove the top layer of it, but after a few minutes I settle down to just let the water flow onto my back and anchor me into one place in my shower.

There are those very rare times in my life when I find absolute peace and contentment, and standing in my shower, being free of my tattoos and letting the hot water warm my skin is one of those moments. I can relax. I don't have to worry about my brother, Spike, or Smokey. I find strength at times like these. I'm ready to turn off the water and to step out of the shower.

Something is wrong.

It doesn't take long to realize the peace in my apartment has been disturbed. Something isn't right on the other side of my bathroom door. It wasn't a sound or a noise but more of a feeling that I often have when I am cocooned inside the warmth of my small bathroom. I slip on the pants that I wore earlier.

There's a crashing sound from the other side of the door and it makes me jump. While I am standing in the warm fog, I hope that's only Spike playing around in there and maybe he's knocked something over.

I step out of the bathroom.

I see my white curtains blowing out of my apartment after I open the door. It doesn't take me long to see who's in my apartment. There are two of them. I know I'm outmatched when I recognize them. They have caught me unprepared.

I open the door quickly before I can even see what is coming at me. I move just fast enough before the dagger strikes the door frame next to me. It's the Black Shirt. He misses me on purpose. I know he could have struck me if he had wanted to.

I look around to see what has happened to my animals and my gun. I don't see any of them. The animals are no longer on the bed, and the pistol is no longer on my refrigerator. I look around, but I don't see them.

The Beat is there too, he's inside my apartment. When he begins to speak to me, he's no longer speaking in his usual poetic style. He sounds more like my English teacher I had when I was in my last year of high school. "If you are looking for your dog and snake, they are gone. They are safe but they are no longer here. We have also taken your handgun and your ridiculous cross."

I'm still alive, and if the two of them wanted me dead they could have done so easily, but I'm still standing. I don't have any tattoos and am at a disadvantage. "Where are my tattoos?"

"They're safe. I had my associates take them out of this luxurious apartment of yours," he says. Now he sounds even more like that man I used to know from someplace. "I am going to use a form of speech called 'sarcasm,' so try to keep up with me. The Auxiliary Corps pays so well. So well, in fact, that you can live like this, but you weren't always the brightest, were you?"

"I know your poems," I say. The Beat now seems familiar to me.

"Of course you do, you probably sat in the back of your overcrowded classroom when you first heard them. Isn't that when your generation first hears my poems? Isn't that when your teachers of your dull misshapen minds read them and you cannot appreciate them?"

"I knew it was you, but those poems were good."

"Do you know what sarcasm means in ancient Greek? It means to rip flesh away from the bone. Sort of poetic, don't you think?" he asks, and then he points at the Black Shirt. "Given the chance, I know he would like to literally rip your flesh off. He's a brute. Luckily for you, I am not. My words are my weapons, and I have spared you so far

tonight. "Don't be sarcastic with me. How could you judge my poems?"

"Welcome to a life of an artist," I say. I don't think I'm being sarcastic, but his feelings aren't my concern. I did like the Beat's poems when I was in high school, but I had forgotten his name and it had only been a few years since I'd studied his poems. What is his name? What is the true name of this evil poet?

"I could've gone farther. I could've already taken your life, but I haven't yet." He smiles, and his smile brings his face out of the shadows. I know who this man is or who he was in my life. I almost wish he had killed me instead of taking my dog. I'm going to die. That's what I think this very moment while I'm standing there in front of them. I feel even more naked without my tattoos. I know I'm at the end of my life. I might have been able to fight the two of them off if I had my tattoos, but without them it's hopeless. They've come into my apartment, my home, and they took my tattoos and left me standing in front of them defenseless. I say in defeat, "Let's get this over with."

"Oh, we will get this over with. This will be over very soon for you," says the Beat to me.

It occurs to me. I know this man. At this instant, I remember his name and say it out loud like a weapon, "You're Herbert Philton-Car. Now I remember your name you. You're the poet. You were famous once. I do remember reading you in high school. I thought you were dead. I liked your poems a lot."

He laughs, "Flattery! Of course, you liked them, but that man died long ago. You won't be the first fan of my work I have killed."

And now the Beat and the Black Shirt laugh together, and I know this will be my last night on Earth.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

From the Sacramento Bee, The President Survives Two Attempts on His Life, September 14th, 1975.

THE PRESIDENT SURVIVED another attempt on his life in Sacramento, California. The assailant used high-pitched whistles to stun those in the president's entourage. The assailant, a petite, red haired, freckle-faced young woman named 'Squeaky,' approached the president while he was walking near the California Capitol. Before she was able to fire a shot, Henry 'Smokey' Gogol and Secret Service agents tackled her and wrestled her to the ground. Seventeen days later, another woman, 'The Mouse,' a mentally unstable accountant, tried to assassinate the president while he was in San Francisco. The Mouse was able to get close to the president before brandishing a handgun. She fired one shot, but her attempt was thwarted by a bystander who grabbed her arm when she raised the gun. The heroic bystander, a Vietnam veteran and Hero Union Corps member named Cedric 'The Hippie' Herzen, was thanked by the president three days later for saving his life in the second attack. 'Squeaky,' was a member of the notorious Larson family. Robert Larson and other members of his 'family' were convicted and sentenced to

prison for murdering actress Valerie Dash and others in 1969. Subsequently, 'Squeaky' and other female members of the cult started an order of 'nuns' within a new group called the International People's Court of Retribution. This group terrorized corporate executives who headed destructive businesses. 'Squeaky' herself was so enamored with Larson that she devised a plot to kill the president to win Larson's approval...



I'm a dead man.

The Black Shirt laughs to himself. He pulls out one of his daggers, and my mind can't decide what to do next because there isn't a right choice. I can try to take one of his knives from him, but I dismiss the idea. I know he's too quick for me. I need to do something, but I don't know exactly what, but I'm not going to give up.

But not giving up and knowing what to do are two different things, and I'm stuck standing in front of them, without a clue.

"Let's get this over with," says the Beat. He takes off his jacket and lays it on my bed. He's smaller than me. I can see that his body has more scars than mine. Pound for pound I'm bigger, but he has seen many more battles.

I try something desperate. I ask, "Maybe you want to fight me without your abilities? Man to man? Isn't that what you want?"

The Beat laughs first and then the Black Shirt joins him. "Is that why you think we're here? To kill you? That's a good joke. Maybe I will include your stupidity in one of my poems. Not a deadly one, but one I might tell friends when we need a good laugh. No, Valentine, we are not here to kill you. Your death sentence is a reprieve for one more night."

"But isn't that the reason you took my tattoos? To make it easier to kill me?"

"To kill you?" He laughs again. "We took your tattoos, you're right. But we took them because we have ordered. We're here to talk to you." The Beat looks away from me and he glances around my apartment. I

can tell by his face he isn't impressed by my home. He says, "You should see where I live. My place is much better than this. Maybe you should try being a villain. The pay's much better."

"Why don't you give me back my tattoos now? And you can leave me, in my dump, all by myself," I say. I don't believe him. They're here to kill me. I know I only have a few minutes before they act. "You know my tattoos are worthless without me?"

The Beat looks at my nearby family photo. In it, there's me, my two sisters, my grandmother, and my brother, Rudy. "That's a good looking family in this picture. You're a wholesome bunch. Do you know what is missing in this photo?" He says, "You're missing glory, fame, or even a little notoriety." He puts the frame back in its place.

I don't understand him; then I say out loud, "If I survive this, I will get some new tattoos. Like maybe a shotgun so I can blow your head off." It isn't true, but it feels good to say things like that sometimes. Every now and then, I want to be tough, but I'm not. I'm still standing in front of them, I'm almost naked. I'm cold and wet. "Before I'm done tonight, you'll find out how useless I am. I promise you that," continuing to act tough, and not succeeding under these conditions. I shut my mouth. I have to be quiet now so I can think. I don't think I can fight my way through them to my front door. I decide to try for the window, but I soon rule that out when I remember I live on the second floor. It's too high even for me, and I don't have tattooed wings on my back. I still need a moment to think, and I decide what I have to do. I am going to retreat. There's only one place in my apartment I can go, and it's my bathroom. But it's a dead end in there.

I'm fast. I catch the two of them off guard. I make my retreat. The Black Shirt throws a knife, and I know I'm lucky because it misses me and strikes the door frame of my bathroom. I am still alive. I lock the door and don't know how I've made it in there without a knife in my back. Was that the right choice? I don't know, but I've made it. Now, I have to think of some way to get away from the two invaders I know I'm only safe in here for a moment.

A shoulder hits the door hard on the other side. I assume it is the

Black Shirt because he is bigger. My apartment is in an older building, and the wood the original carpenters used was much stronger than the stuff they use today. I also know while the door is thick, the wood won't hold forever, and I have to hurry up and do something to save myself.

There is no place to go. The only place I might hope to find something to defend myself is in the medicine cabinet. I open its door. In it, I find a permanent marker, from a girl I used to know. She had been practicing drawing tattoos on my skin to see if they would come to life. They hadn't, and she must've abandoned this marker in my medicine cabinet. Maybe it'll still work.

There is another crash against the door, and I hear the timbers give their first groan.

I reach for the marker. I open it.

There's another crash against the door.

I look closer at the tip, and as far as I can tell it looks okay. I need to draw something quick, and I know it needs to be a weapon I can use to defend myself against the Black Shirt. I touch the tip of the marker against my skin. It's dry. I need to be careful with it. Maybe I can wet the tip and get it working again.

The crashing against the door stops. Then I hear the Beat speak to me from the other side. "We will come in, and if when we do we are going to kill you. It would be easier if you just came out, and talked to us."

I say, "Shut up." I turn on the water. It takes a moment for the hot water to flow.

"That's not the way to deal with the situation. Val Vega, you will either work with me, or I will have you killed. Is that what you want?"

"I'd rather die fighting you." I have my finger under the water and it seems warm enough for me to place the marker under it. I think it has been flowing long enough, and I want the hot water to coax the ink to the tip.

"Have it your way. I'm done being reasonable," he says and the door frame cracks again, and it will only take them a few more tries before it breaks.

I decide to write on my skin; I'll mark my left forearm. The warm water has done the trick, and it starts to flow. My arm is the easiest place for me to work. This isn't my best art, but I think it's good enough to turn into something real. I use the whole length of my arm. It's a short sword I have drawn. It's crooked and misshapen, but maybe it will be good enough to fight with.

It comes to life on my skin. I grab at it. New tattoos burn when I first touch them and this one is no different. But it feels flimsy, and I know it won't last because it isn't deep enough under my skin. I hope it will last long enough to fight off the two villains outside my bathroom door.

There's a final blow. It's hard enough to make the wood crack and explode. I know I need to move forward and strike the Black Shirt if I want to get at him.

I take my new sword and thrust it forward. With my hand on its crude hilt, I can feel it enter the man's flesh, and I hear a cry from the other side. My hand wants to withdraw the sword, but I keep it moving forward into the man's arm. He cries even louder, and I know my new blade has done what I need it to do. The Black Shirt realizes he's in a bad spot, and he retreats backward. With a jerk of his body, he frees his arm from my blade. Then he goes back where I can no longer reach him.

I go forward as much as I can. I'm still able to hold onto my short sword. The door grows even heavier. The Beat has put his body weight against the door though he isn't as big as the Black Shirt. He stops.

The Beat starts to recite a poem, and I know I am in trouble because it will leave me defenseless against him. I have to do something now.

He says in a malefic tone he likes to use when reciting one of his deadly poems, "I never dream of a mountain so high. The air is too thin, and it makes it hard to breathe..."

I push back on the door. I know he wants to suffocate me. I'm surprised by my strength, and I know I'm in shock him because he stops his poem. He's quiet before he recomposes himself with the weight of

the door. I'm still clutching the handle of my weapon. I haven't dropped it. Better yet it hasn't disappeared. I know it's only temporary, and I have to make the most of my time.

I still have to get through the broken door. It makes it hard for me to get out of my bathroom. It takes me a moment.

When I finally get out, I can see the Black Shirt is still in my apartment and he's holding his arm where I stabbed him. He has taken the sheet off my bed. There's blood flowing. He's trying to make a tourniquet.

The Beat is still in front of me. He says, "It isn't polite to interrupt a poet after he starts."

I can tell he's mad at me, and I'm lucky he hasn't started another poem to try to kill me. I step towards him with my new blade. If he wants to kill me he better do it soon.

"Oh, be quiet, maybe Valentine can't stand your poems any more than I can."

There's a new voice, and it's a woman. A woman who I thought died because of me. I turn my head and see her, and my first reaction is to smile because I've missed her and she's in my apartment.

"I've always told you your poems should be more about life. Maybe about dancing or something fun...but you're so gloomy it almost makes a glamorous girl like me want to cry. What would that do to my makeup?"

It's Daphnia. She's alive, and she's even more beautiful than ever. I want to run and hug her, but I know this isn't right. She had been dead, or at least I thought she was dead. It didn't matter what I thought because she is standing in front of me, and I don't know how to act.

"Honey, you could at least put on some clothes instead of standing there almost naked," says Daphnia smiling at me.

"We should kill him. We should kill the miserable clod," says the Beat to her. "We don't need his kind. Heroes like him don't change. They would rather die than join us."

Daphnia goes to my closet and looks at the clothes hanging in there. She takes out a pair of pants, hands them to me, and I put them on. She

then goes back to my closet, and she takes a collared shirt off of its hanger. She holds it up and takes a look. When she's satisfied that they will go well together she waits for me to put on the shirt.

I look down and the sword I had drawn a few minutes ago, is starting to fade. I continue to watch it disappear. When it's gone, I'm left with nothing to defend myself.

I turn my head a little, and I can see that the Black Shirt is still sitting on my bed holding his wound. The Beat is standing next to him. I can tell he isn't happy that I'm still alive, but it seems to me he won't do anything until Daphnia orders him to.

Daphnia gives me a nod of encouragement to finish putting on my shirt, and after I get done buttoning it, she comes to me and puts down my collar. It's sticking up. She has a gentle touch, and when I feel her hand against my neck, I know she doesn't want to hurt me.

She says, "I have seen you many times without a shirt, but you're more handsome when you're dressed up. Someday I will have to get you in a suit or maybe even a tuxedo."

The Beat has had enough, and he says to her, "If you won't kill him then I will."

Daphnia immediately turns and stares at him. It's a look that I've only seen her give a few times, and it's a stare you don't want to be on the receiving end of. She says to him, "I wouldn't if I were you. I really wouldn't."

The Beat backs down for now but he's going to kill me. He's an evil man. He doesn't like backing down from a fight.

Daphnia speaks to him. "Did you think this was going to be just like the Blinkers? They were so easy to turn over to our side. I have always found the Blinkers to be simple men. It only took a few minutes of work to convince them, but it's not going to be that way with Valentine."

I know I am not safe amongst these people. I say, "Did you try to convince Smokey or Hippie to become evil? They're more powerful than me. Hippie would've made a great prize."

Daphnia says, "He's dead. We didn't even try to convince him. I

knew better. Those old heroes like Smokey and Hippie can't change. Maybe they should've come down our path a long time ago, but they are not like you or me."

"Like me?"

"Yes, the Auxiliary Hero Corps is useless any longer with those relics working for them. I saw it early enough. Do you think you are ever going to make it up to the Hero Corps? Not likely. If you stay with the Auxiliary Hero Corps, you are going to end up like Smokey. A forgotten nobody."

"Are you happy?" I ask.

"Yes, because I've gained power. I've new wealth now, and pretty soon I'll have fame. Val, you're wasting your time in the Corps. Come with me, and the two of us can rule this city." Daphnia reaches down and picks up a handbag I didn't notice earlier. She places the strap over her shoulder

"I don't want to rule anyone."

"Don't you?" she asks as if I have hit her with a lightning bolt from out of the blue. She almost gives me the look she gave the Beat. "We all have secret desires. Maybe yours isn't power. Whatever you're looking for I know you won't find it in the Auxiliary Hero Corps. You'll only find it with us."

I see the Beat reach down into his pocket and he pulls pull out a gun. It's my Beretta Tomcat. He points it at me. Daphnia sees me look over at him, and she turns towards him also, and she says. "Put that away."

"Forget about my gun," I say to him. "What did you do with Spike?"

Daphnia says, "I said put the gun away. We are all friends here." He isn't listening to her. And he isn't looking at her, and he doesn't see her reach into her large purse.

"Friends...yeah right after I kill him, and then I'll kill that dog too."

"He's still alive?"

"Of course he's alive. Daphnia didn't want us killing him," he says.

He starts talking to Daphnia and he says it almost sounds like a desperate man, "Kill the boy now, or I will."

He points my unreliable Tomcat at me and pulls the trigger, but he misses.

Daphnia throws my snake to me. When I catch it, I immediately throw it at the Beat. The poet drops the gun and reaches up with both hands to try to get the snake off of him. The snake is too strong, and she digs her muscles even tighter around the vulnerable part of his body. When there isn't any more air, he goes to his knees and falls on his face.

I'm transformed into silence as I watch. I reach to help the man, but Daphnia puts out her arm and stops me from getting closer. "Too late. He's no longer a threat."

The door opens, and there's my brother. I'm surprised. He's standing in the entrance with my dog. Spike is still alive, and I am thankful when I see him. The odds are more in my favor now that my dog is near, and maybe he could help me defeat all of them.

I am not expecting what happens next. Daphnia walks over to my brother and she kisses him on the lips. It's a lasting kiss.

It is the Beat who makes the next move. I am surprised he is able to get up. He's again holding my unlucky pistol in his hand. He must've grabbed it when I watched them kiss. Now instead of pointing it at me, he's pointing it at Daphnia.

The snake has loosened her grip. The Beat must've done something to her. My snake drops off his neck so he is able to recite another poem.

His voice isn't the same and it's much weaker now, "I should've killed you before. When you first told me of your hare-brained plan, I knew it would never work. I knew taking these two out of the Auxiliary Corps was stupid from the beginning. We don't need them. You may have corrupted the younger one with your charms, but I've already said that Val will never come over to our side. It's ludicrous to think so. So now you're going to die."

Daphnia turns around and says, "I'm from this neighborhood. I should be the one who kills you tonight. You'll wait. I'll make the decisions tonight."

"I don't think so. I'm holding this weapon, and I don't think you can use your powers before I discharge it."

"I wouldn't be so sure about your situation if I were you."

"You're mistaken." He coughs and continues, "Age doesn't bring wisdom. Experience brings it. Trying not to make the same mistakes over and over again."

The flash of silver from the knife. It doesn't hit me, but it strikes the Beat instead. The dagger lands in his stomach. The Black Shirt's aim was true.

"I'm dying," says the Beat. "That's not cool." He points my pistol at the Black Shirt and fires two times. But the Black Shirt is fast enough to deflect both of the bullets with his one dagger. The Beat collapses back onto my bed, and I don't know if he's dead.

"Kill me, you'd never be that lucky. You're a fool, a second rate villain, and you never had the foresight to see the true nature of my plan," says Daphnia.

The Beat still is able to speak and he says, "I'm dying."

"Yes, you are. But I'm not going to hasten your journey," she says, quieter this time. "You're finished and so is everyone who is against me." She reaches for the man on the floor with his blood coming from his wound, and she takes the Tomcat out of his hand. The pistol slips into her grip, she stands, takes a step towards me, and hands me back my pistol. "Here you go. I think this belongs to you."

I take the gun and place it against the bicep on my right arm so it can turn back into a tattoo. Turning back into its inky original state, it's nice to have one of my tattoos back on my skin.

Daphnia does something I had never seen her do. She reaches out with her right hand, and she points her fingers at the Beat. She wants to kill him.

"Don't," I say, but she isn't listening to me. It's difficult for me to watch her kill a man who can't fight back.

I move towards her, but a gust of wind knocks me off my feet. I fall to the floor. I feel the air leave my lungs as I try to regain my breath.

Rudy has pushed me over with his powers. It must have been him, and I didn't know he could do that.

"I'm more powerful than you think, brother, and with Daphnia's help I will surpass everyone including you."

Spike comes to me. He wants to help me.

"Let's leave, but first there's something I need to take," says Daphnia to The Beat. "Leave his body there for me now. It's my turn to do something to him."

Amazingly there is something leaving the Beat. Is it his soul leaving him? I'm confused, and I can't tell. It's a red glow, and it hovers above him before it comes to Daphnia's hand. "There you are. Now you are mine forever," she says. "You'll live, but you'll belong to me from now on."

The body of the Beat lies on the floor, and I think he's dead, but I'm wrong. He moves a little, and I'm relieved when I see he's alive.

What has she done to him?

"We'll leave you now, Valentine. I know you can hear me, and I am sorry about the mess in your apartment." Daphnia has come over to me, and she looks at me as I lie on the floor. I want to get up, but I'm in a vulnerable position, and I wait. "This time I will let you live, and I will ask you to join me only once more. If you refuse me again, honey, I'll have no choice but to kill you, and you're far too pretty for me to want to do that to you."

I hear my brother speak, and he says, "Be smart, Val. Don't be a fool. Join us."

Daphnia moves to my brother and reaches for his hand. He takes it, and those two stand over me. Daphnia says, "Give him time, Rudy, and he'll come to us when he's ready. We only have to be patient."

The sounds of police sirens fill our ears, and Daphnia says, "It's time to leave."

My brother asks, "What about the Beat?"

"Leave him," she says. "He'll just wake up in a minute. I don't know why but this always happens to the weak." The two of them turn and leave.

The Black Shirt walks over to the Beat, ignores Daphnia's orders, and picks up the man. He puts him over his shoulder, and the Beat's head turns towards me. I can see his face, and he surprises me when he opens his eyes. He's disoriented, but with his hand, he touches a spot on his own neck. A look of relief comes over him, and his hand is touching a small silver wire protruding from it.

The wire is something I never noticed before.

The three of them leave, and I'm still alive. I'm left surprised and confused.

CHAPTER TWO

Plato, Old School Deep Thinking Superhero

'There are two things a person should never be angry at, what they can help, and what they cannot.'



I get dressed and put the rest of my clothes back on. It only takes me a minute to replace my tattoos and get out of my apartment. Instead of going down the stairs and out the front door of my building. I decide to leap out of my second-floor window to save time. I am not a flying hero, so I don't run and jump like I have sometimes seen them do in the movies. No, open my window, and take a second to look down. It's too high for me to jump down safely, but if I hang from the ledge, it might be possible for me to land without hurting myself.

I use my hands and grasp the window's ledge to lower myself. I look down again, and my feet are only six feet closer to the ground, but enough to make me think I won't get hurt. I let go of the ledge and fall.

It isn't the distance of the fall where I end up hurting myself, but it's the garden hose that I couldn't see from above. I twist my ankle when I land on the curled up bundle. The pain shoots up my leg, and I fall to the side. My shortcut doesn't end up being one. Luckily, my resting place is soft and I end up in the wet grass. I am soaked on the right side of my body and might have sprained my ankle.

I don't have time. I must get up.

I raise myself up as fast as I can, but my ankle screams at me when I want to put weight on it. I don't care. It hurts, but I must continue if I am going to stop the pack of villains who had just left my apartment. Again, they have proven they are smarter and cleverer than me.

I can hear a car speeding away. The car has been parked a block away, but now I see it speeding towards me. I get out of the way. I dive for a patch of grass. When I land, even with my ankle hurting, I make a pretty good roll for a landing. He has missed me. I see the car drive away. I'm getting mad, and my hurt ankle isn't making my mood any better. Defeated again.

I think about doing something I'm not proud of. I think about joining them. I'm tempted to join Daphnia. I'm admitting this to myself. If there was ever a chance for me to change sides, to leave the Auxiliary Hero Corps, this would be the right time.

But it's not the thing to do, and I quickly change my mind.

There's a gentle breeze and I focus on my surroundings. I need to get moving again, but I know I can't walk far. I look and I see the little white car with a flyer on it. I hobble over to it. With a smart phone and the right app, I can be driving it in five minutes. I pull the flyer off and read it. There has been an effort in my neighborhood to renovate the old Vogue theatre. Reading the flyer, I can see some of my neighbors are still trying to bring the old theatre back to life. I fold the flyer and put it in my pocket. I know where to go. It's the Vogue. The Vogue Theatre is the key to what's going on, or maybe it's the place where this is all taking place. Why hadn't I realized the old theatre is where Daphnia and her friends are hiding out? It was their staging ground. It would be like the old Hippie and go to the rat's nest and clean it out.

I open the small car's door. Maybe if I'm lucky, I can find some clue out there to help me figure out what is going on.

CHAPTER THREE

From a White House Press Conference, August 26, 1981

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL: "I am not participating in any strike against the Government of the United States or any agency thereof. I will not do so while I'm an employee of the Government of the United States or any agency thereof."

It is for this reason that I must tell those who fail to report for duty this morning they are in violation of the law. If they do not report for work within 48 hours, they have forfeited their jobs.

Press: Are you going to order any Hero Union Corps members who violate the law to go to jail?

The President: Well, I have some people around here, and. Maybe I should refer that question to the Attorney General.

Press: Do you think that they should go to jail, Mr. President, anybody who violates this law?

The President: I told you what I think we should do. They're terminated.

The Attorney General: Well, as the President has said, striking

under these circumstances makes up a violation of the law. We intend to start criminal proceedings against those who have violated the law.

Press: How soon will you start criminal proceedings, Mr. Attorney General?

The Attorney General: We will start those proceedings as soon as we can.

Press: Today?

The Attorney General: The process will be underway by noon today.

Press: Are you going to try and fine the Hero Union Corps one hundred thousand dollars per day?

The Attorney General: Well, that's the prerogative of the court. In the event that any individuals found guilty of contempt of a court order, the penalty for that, of course, imposed by the court.



I am mad and it takes me a few minutes to clear my head.

It doesn't take a hero code to tell me what to do next. I'm going to follow them back to the Vogue. It's the deep-dark hole full of rats like Daphnia, the Beat, the Black Shirt, and my brother were fleeing to. I'm going to find them. I also leave a message for Smokey at the Templeton. Hopefully, the bear will show.

Before I enter the old theatre, I have to get Spike off of my skin. I know it won't be easy dealing with Daphnia, the Beat, my brother, and the Black Shirt on my own. If I had time to think for a moment I would.

I only have one purpose. Every breath I take and every heart beat focuses my body on revenge. I walk to the Vogue. Those who I know and have loved have played me for a fool, and I plan on putting an end to it.

A gust of cold wind blows me sideways. It must be coming up from False Creek and it reaches me here in the poorer part of this city.

I want Spike next to me. I also want to put on a coat for now over my dress shirt Daphnia had picked out for me. It's still early in the night. Homeless people are waiting to secure a place in the front of

empty buildings. They're looking to find a little bit of shelter for the night.

I need my wits. Spike waits next to me. A woman tourist is trying to find her way back to her hotel and she asks me the directions to Richards Street. I must no longer seem as angry as I once had. I point and give her the easiest way back. I must appear calmer. There's one building in this neighborhood that's been abandoned for years, but none seek its shelter or find warmth in its walls. It's cursed or maybe it's haunted, but there are no squatters there. This is the place where in my heart I know the Beat, the Black Shirt, Daphnia, and my brother have been hiding all along. My patrol should've flushed them out of there weeks ago.

Spike and I are there. I look down at Spike. He's waiting on me. We must get inside.

The Vogue is an old movie palace, but now it's only a theatre in ruins. Smokey says he used to go and watch movies when he was a child. While I never had a chance to see a film on its screen, it doesn't mean I'd never been in there.

When I was in high school, I'd snuck into the Vogue with some friends. The theatre is an ancient ruin in the city. I convinced myself to squeeze through the small opening. At the time I only made it to the backstage. The Vogue had been an old vaudeville theatre, and there was enough room on its stage to showcase the comedians, jugglers, and singers who performed there.

The movie screen had been removed long ago, and I remember walking through piles of junk that had been left behind. In there, I heard music from below. It was an old song, the kind they would've played during the war years, a song that reminded me of the kind of music my grandmother played that was popular in her day.

I remembered I had gotten scared when a chair came crashing down from the balcony into the auditorium below. After I heard the noise there was a laugh from above. I decided it was time for me to leave. I ran back to the window where I needed to escape and crawled through. My friends laughed at me when I returned to the alley.

But tonight I wasn't going to leave the Vogue in a hurry. I knew I was going to do my best to bring the nest of villains to justice.

I'm able to get inside the theatre after all of these years. To the best of my recollection, there have been no changes that I can see once I get inside. My biggest problem is lifting up Spike and putting him through the open window. I should've turned Spike back into a tattoo but I wasn't thinking.

I had brought a flashlight, but the dark doesn't seem to bother me. It doesn't bother Spike either and I can hear him sniffing around. I'm uncertain where to start. I hear Spike react to something, and I'm not sure what he senses. Someone else is out there.

There's a beam from another flashlight. It waves back and forth. It finally shines on my face. I'm blinded, but I am not anxious and I refuse to let my hand touch my other tattoos, especially my Beretta Tomcat. My pistol stays on my skin for now. I don't want to remove it yet, and I hope my instincts are correct.

"It's pretty gloomy in here," says the Old Hippie. It's the same voice I recognize from weeks before, and his tones are just as missed as the man I missed saying them.

"It can't be you," I state.

"Why can't it be? It's me, the Old Hippie, your old friend. With a quick motion, he takes the flashlight and he shines it on his own face. Spike is the first to greet my old friend. He jumps and knocks the light out of his hands. The flashlight lands on the ground and shines on my feet instead. Spike has his front two paws on his shoulders and starts to lick the old man's face. But it doesn't matter because three are happy. I say, "I can't believe it when I see you. I went to your funeral."

"Are you mad? I'm sorry about that. It wasn't my idea to make me dead." The Old Hippie gently places the dog's front legs back on the ground.

"Was it Smokey's?" I asked. "It doesn't sound like him."

"No, it wasn't Smokey's idea. It was way above his pay grade. Plus, you know him; he doesn't think that way," says the Old Hippie. He stops speaking for a moment, and I think he doesn't want to tell me

what he needs to say, but he changes his mind and continues to speak. "I'm tired of all the secrets and the lies. It's time for the secrecy to end."

"I still don't know how two old men villains are young enough to keep fighting when they should be in a nursing home. It's not right," I say making my mind up. I want to know the answer. So I ask the question, "What is going on?" Are they their descendants or has someone else decided to take their characters?"

"It's worse. They discovered a way to turn back the hands of time. The villains of our city have discovered their own fountain of youth or the next best thing. They are the original rogues but now they are young. Our top guys haven't discovered their secrets but we know it's going to upset the balance. It's really not cool if you ask me. It also doesn't help our side when Daphnia and your brother decided to go over to the other side."

I don't know what to say at first, but then I ask, "This is bad isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's really a downer, and I wish we could tune out and drop out, but we can't."

Looking down to make sure that Spike is still next to me I say, "I'm going to do my best to end this tonight. I don't care if I have to do this alone. But having your help would be better for all of us."

"I agree," says Hippie.

"Are you ready to go? I would think the sooner the better."

The Hippie doesn't say anything. I can see him fighting himself, and I'm uncertain if he's going with me or if he's leaving me here on my own.

"I don't believe you," I say. "It's not possible for them to become younger."

"That's easy for you to say because you're young and you think you know everything, but I'm not so certain any longer. The longer I've been walking these streets the less I know. There's always something out there that challenges my thinking."

"You don't sound like the Hippie I know. Are you sure you're him?"

"Maybe it's because I've died and now I'm back from the grave." He laughs to himself and says, "Nope, I'm not sure who I am anymore, but I know I am going with you and Spike down there to help find them. After that, I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

"Thanks, Hippie," I'm sure he hears me but he doesn't say anything back to me. I ask, "Are you ready?" I end up following Hippie because he has the flashlight, and also because he takes the initiative to lead. I'm not sure where I'm going, but the Hippie has no hesitation. He leads us to a wing of the old theatre, and he stops when he reaches a hole in the floor. He gets on his knees and shines the flashlight around in the hole. Cobwebs and dust are common throughout the rest of the theatre, but here there are no cobwebs and I can see a lack of dust. "It's here. They are down here," says the Hippie. He gets ready to climb down into the hole, and that's when we hear the music.

It was so long ago, but I'm certain it's the same song I heard the last time I was inside of this theatre. The song stops the Hippie, and he doesn't enter the hole in the theatre's floor. "I think they're expecting us," he says. "So much for surprising them."

I see the Hippie do something I wasn't expecting; he pulls a pistol out of the Navy jacket he always wears. He looks over at me to see my reaction, and when he sees the surprised look on my face he says, "This reminds me of the old days when I'd have to crawl into rat holes like this all of the time."

I say, "There's a good chance my brother's down there. I'm hoping no one gets hurt or killed tonight."

"It's my experience that it never happens when it's time to go rat hunting."

"He's still my brother. I still have to try to get him out of there."

"Dude, I understand, but the Beat and the Black Shirt don't play fair, and they will try to kill us if they can. You know killing makes the two of them very happy."

I stick to my point and say, "Rudy is my brother, and my grandmother won't forgive me if I don't do everything to protect him."

The Hippie smiles and says, "He's your brother. I understand you want to do everything you can to help him."

I still have my pistol, but it isn't in my hand. The Tomcat is still a tattoo, and I know I need to keep Rudy and Daphnia as safe as I can and I don't want to make it real. I'm not afraid to use it, but I have to try and make sure the two of them don't come to any harm.

I had always heard of trapdoors in theatres, but before I move to go inside, the Hippie surprises me again when he states, "It's so tight because it's not a trap door. It's a star-trap. It's to get actors on stage fast from below. A trapdoor has stairs, but not a star-trap. There's a platform with springs. They're no longer used because they weren't safe. If the stage-operator doesn't move mechanism fast enough the actor could fall back through the floor."

I'm surprised by Hippie's theatre knowledge, and I grimace when I think about what could be down there and ask, "How did you know that?"

"Hey, I used to do a little bit of acting on the side. I was an extra on some TV shows, but sometimes I got to be on stage. You have to remember there was a time when I was in demand."

I look at him and think maybe he will start speaking Latin. Or tell me his knowledge of physics and how he had once been recruited by NASA.

"What? I know it's strange, but there was a time when the public couldn't get enough heroes in the past. We were on TV commercials, magazine ads, and even asked to throw out the first pitch at ball games."

I start to climb down in the star-trap, and I stop myself from going any farther. I ask, "What about Spike?"

"It's not too deep. I can hand him down to you. Go on...between the two of us, I think he'll be okay to go through."

The Hippie is wrong. Spike isn't going to make it through. It is much easier for a man to squeeze through, but when it comes to my dog there is no way to get Spike through this hole. I return Spike back to a tattoo on his place on my chest.

I lower myself down, and I have placed the flashlight in my pocket

so I can use both of my hands to lower myself. The Hippie is right. It's not too far down, and my feet land on a platform which is five feet lower than the stage. I get the Hippie's light out of my pocket and shine it around. There's a set of stairs which lead down another ten feet to another wooden floor. I turn back around to the hole and I see the Hippie's feet poking through waiting for me to help him down. I lace my fingers together and give as much of my support as I can. It only takes a few more seconds to lower the old hero down and another second or two to get us down to the even lower floor. I'm about to change Spike back when it happens.

There's a dagger thrown at us. It misses the two of us, and I'm surprised because it came out of nowhere. I dive to the ground as fast as I can. I turn off the flashlight. I know it's the Black Shirt who is out there, and he I know he won't miss again.

It's dark, but I have someone with me who can help. I touch Spike and in a few seconds, he takes shape next to me. The dog senses the danger and I pull him close to me. He wants to go forward, but I don't need my dog to take a hit from another one of the Black Shirt's daggers. I'm waiting for the Black Shirt to make a sound.

But it's not the Black Shirt who makes the first sound. It's the Hippie. He's still behind me, and I don't know why he's moving.

Old Hippie laughs. He says to the Black Shirt, "You and the Beat have already killed me once. Isn't there a double jeopardy or something? I don't think you should be able to kill me again."

I'm even more surprised when I hear another man laugh. It's the Black Shirt. I've never heard the man speak before and he says, "Ja, maybe, tonight one of my blades will finally get lucky and kill you for a second time."

His voice has a thick German accent and it's higher than the Beat. It doesn't fit the big man's body and hearing him speak it even puts a smile on my face. And that's enough for me.

I have another tattoo I want to use instead on the Black Shirt. It's my snake and I'm hoping she can get close enough to the villain after I

throw her. I make a quick toss, and she lands on the villain. She starts to squeeze him.

It's time for me to attack. I get up and rush the Black Shirt. I'm taking my chances from moving out of my safe spot towards him. When I get to him, my snake has wrapped himself around one of the man's legs. If she kept up her attack it wouldn't kill him. It was painful, and I didn't begrudge the man for screaming because I would've screamed too. She can put down a great deal of pressure. The Black Shirt had one of his daggers in his hand, and he's ready to cut her off of his leg. I kick the hand holding the dagger, and the knife flies out of his hand. I kick him again. The toes of my boot lands against his head. It's the right spot, and I knock him out.

Hippie must've been following me because he's standing behind me and says, "That was impressive. You've defeated a super villain."

I'm surprised, and I reach down to take a look at the Black Shirt. He's out cold, and I don't think he'll be waking up anytime soon. He's younger than me. I look at him and shake my head. This guy wasn't eighty years old, and I don't care what Hippie had said to me earlier about them having found a way to get younger. I want to take a look at the small wire protruding out of his neck.

I say, "It's too bad we don't have anything to keep him tied up so we can keep going."

The Hippie reaches into his coat and pulls out a couple of zip ties. He smiles and moves over to the leather clad villain and says, "We don't need him waking up anytime soon, and causing us more trouble, do we? I'm going to take off his belt full of those nasty daggers too."

I remove my snake from his leg. She relaxes her grip on him. If I would have let her she would've squeezed the life out of him. I'll have to give her something else to eat later on. I turn her back into a tattoo, and I'm thankful she wanted to go hunting tonight. The music we heard earlier has stopped. I say, "I'm tired of this game."

"Downer man, this is eating you up," says the Hippie. After he makes sure the Black Shirt's bonds around his wrists are secure, he stands up and looks at the man's face again.

“For once, I want to decide how I’m going to act.”

The Old Hippie takes the remaining daggers off of the villain’s belt. He puts a few of them in his jacket pocket, and then he shines the flashlight at the Black Shirt’s neck. “There’s the wire, and it’s in his neck, yuck.”

“What’s going on. Can you tell by looking at it?”

“I don’t know, man. There’s something else underneath his skin, and your eyes are better than mine. Come and take a look.

I bend down, and there’s a mark behind his right ear. I ask for the flashlight back so I can illuminate the area better. I know a thing or two about tattoos, but it isn’t one. It’s was darker than a tattoo’s ink. I wanted to say it’s black, but to my eyes, it almost seems darker. The mark under the man’s skin is in the shape of a rectangle. I keep looking at it until I see it clearer. I say, “It’s not tattoos. It’s a microchip. Do you have a pocket knife or something I could use to dig it out of there?”

The Hippie reaches for the Black Shirt and removes one of the villain’s daggers. He looks at it and hands the knife to me.

I smile at him as I take it, “Thanks.” The blade of the dagger is big, but the tip of the knife is fine. I go to the bottom edge of the chip on the villain’s neck, but I’m not having too much luck, and I don’t want to damage it with the big blade. I take a deep breath, and let the air back out of my lungs. When I finish, I stop and listen to everything around me. I can’t even hear the Hippie’s breath. It is quiet, and I continue the attack on the chip in the Black Shirt’s neck. I’m thankful he hasn’t woken up. I didn’t want to perform my minor surgery with him awake, but asleep or awake I’m going to remove the chip.

This time I attacked attack the chip a couple of millimeters wider than I had the first time. The tip of the blade digs into the man’s skin. The wound had time to bleed out of the cut I had made. It doesn’t matter because I had done it right this time, and I had made the right incision, and I start to pry it out.

“Be careful, we need to keep it in good shape,” says the Hippie.

I don’t say anything. I’m concentrating on what I am doing. Now it is ready to come out, and I get just a little bit more of the knife under-

neath it. It makes a sucking sound as I lift it out, and I'm surprised to see it also has a long tail attached to it. I get it out far enough where a knife is no longer helpful. It's finally out, and my first surgery is complete. I think my patient will live. There are some more drops of blood but I keep the pressure on it, and the bleeding soon stops.

I hand the weird chip over to the Hippie. He studies it and doesn't say anything, and then he places it in his pocket. Maybe if the two of us get out of here we can get back to Smitty at the Corps' headquarters. Some of the techs can figure it out, but until then there's nothing else we can do with it.

I look back at the Black Shirt and he looks different to me. I'm not sure what has changed about him, but it's something. "Hey Hippie, take a look at Sleeping Beauty. What's different about him?"

"I don't know...he looks more tired, but I don't know, Dude. We got to get going. There are still others we have to deal with tonight...and we have already taken too long tonight. What about Spike?"

"Is he looking older, or is it just me?"

"The miracle of the computer age is no longer his friend, and now time is catching up with him. We all are going to die, and there's no way around it." The Hippie says, "Before I became a peace lover, a hippie, I was in the war. I almost died in Vietnam every day. I was a tunnel rat. A good one too." He starts to walk away from me.

We leave the Black Shirt to his fate and father time. I follow Hippie. He finds another staircase going down. We go deeper into this labyrinth underneath the stage of the old Vogue theatre.

It doesn't take too long for the Hippie to find everyone we're looking for, but now it's a place that holds all our enemies including my brother.

"Look who has shown up, we are expecting you," says the Beat sitting at the center of an old wooden table. On one side of the man is my brother, Rudy, and sitting next to him on the other side is Daphnia. I think she looks even prettier than before when she was in our squad. While she glows and is radiant, there's also something sad about her sitting here next to the Beat and my brother.

"You've made it past the Black Shirt...that's impressive. Have you killed him?" I'm tired of listening to the Beat. He continues, "Embrace a change in your life. It only takes a little surgery and you can always be forever young."

"What did he say?" asks the Hippie. "Don't listen to him, Val."

I ask, "What do you want from me? What are you offering me?"

It's Rudy who speaks and I'm surprised because I'm not expecting him to be so bold around the Beat. "You know what he's asking. You aren't dumb, and you don't have to be rude. Think about it, brother."

Yet again, I'm surprised by him, and I want to speak but I can see out the corner of my eye that Daphnia is laughing at me. She says to me, "I already had the surgery...and I was surprised how easy it was. I'm going to be beautiful forever."

I say back to her, "It costs too much. It cost you your soul, and all of us in the Corps have to pay your butcher's bill." She doesn't say anything to me, but it's my little brother who wants to speak again. I don't let him talk and I cut him off by asking, "What price did you pay for becoming a traitor?"

"I never took the oath...I still was just a recruit when I left," says Rudy turning himself completely in my direction. I can tell he's mad.

"I don't know what they offered you, but it can't be worth more than the respect of your family," I say. "What will grandmother think when she has found out what you've done? The Auxiliary Corps won't care. They'll consider you to be rogue and they will hunt you down until they kill you or put you in jail."

"They can try, but they will fail. I took everything into account, big brother," he says. "I'm safer here than I would be anywhere else."

"What made you leave? Go against the Corps?" I ask.

Rudy turns away from me into his original position in his chair. He doesn't want to tell me the reason why he left. I know him well enough to leave him alone when he gets this way because he's too stubborn sometimes.

It's the Beat who speaks up next and he decides to give me the answer I'm looking for, "He did it for your grandmother. He wants her

to be young again, and he never wants her to die. But there's a catch and we haven't agreed to the deal yet."

I look at Rudy and say, "Grandmother would never agree to this. You have to be stupid if you think you can talk her into your hare-brain scheme. It doesn't matter what you offer, she is not going to follow along."

The Beat says, "The deal isn't complete. Your brother needs you to come over to our side too. If you don't then there's no deal. He's not getting the surgery he wants for the old lady." He puts a wicked smile on his face and continues, "Without you, there's no deal. Unless you want to let your grandmother die someday. You won't save her because you're selfish." The Beat takes his right hand and makes a motion as he speaks, "Don't you think you are a wee bit on the selfish side? Maybe you want to see to her get old, sick, and die."

I hate this guy. He's right. I didn't want to have my grandmother to get any older, and I didn't want her to die. Was he right? Was I being selfish? Trying to hide how bad I'm feeling about what he has said to me, I say, "I almost liked you better when you were trying to kill me instead of you being a boring salesman."

Hippie turns to me and says, "Val, we have to either fight or go. The longer we stay here the more trouble we are going to be in." When he stops speaking he looks closely at my face and asks, "You aren't considering this? Are you?"

"Think about what he's saying."

"Shut up," says the Beat to Hippie. "I'm offering it to the boy, but for you, there's nothing. There's only death for you."

The Hippie laughs, and then he quotes one of his favorite movies. "You know what you get for the second prize... it's a set of steak knives! You know what the third prize guy gets, he gets nothing, he gets nothing... he gets fired! Because you don't know how to close. You don't know how to take it. Are you man enough to take it?"

"That doesn't make any sense," says the Beat, not knowing what the Hippie is referring to. "Why don't you be quiet, old man, and I'll deal

with you in a moment? Or maybe I'll let one of your former friends to deal with you."

Daphnia speaks up and says, "You're wasting your time. We need to take them out now." She gets up, but the Beat holds up his hand. He gives her a signal to stay calm. She obeys. She has a disappointed look on her face. I know what else she's feeling. I also wish Smokey was here. I want his help, and I wished I had sought him out when I got myself into this mess.

The Hippie speaks up again, and I know what he's doing. He's trying to start the fight now, but he's the Old Hippie, and I know he won't start a fight but he always reacts to one. "Let's get this over with. There was a time when you would fight me on sight, but isn't there any hatred left. Am I still your nemesis? Or are you afraid to fight me?"

The Beat says to me and ignores him, "Have you made up your mind? I need to know now. Are you going to save your grandmother? She would listen to you. She would have the surgery if both you and Rudy presented it to her, but time is slipping away and I'm getting tired of all this mindless banter." He then speaks to Hippie, "All in good time. All in good time, old friend."

I say, "I don't know what to do." I hope he believes me. I think I'm stalling for time, but I'm uncertain if that's true, or even if he believes me now.

The Hippie isn't finished. He reaches into his pocket, and he pulls out the microchip with the long wire tail that I removed it from the Black Shirt earlier. It's in his hand, and he shows it to everyone. "This is what happens to your friend." It's in his right hand, and with a quick motion, he throws it at the Beat.

Instead of catching it, the man recoils and it falls on the table in front of him. He has a look of horror on his face, but not Daphnia. She looks mad. The Beat still hasn't recovered from having the chip thrown at him. "I don't think you know what you have done. You're an animal."

Hippie says, "I think he's going back on the senior citizens' mailing list. It's a downer getting old, but getting old so fast without that little beauty for support must be a real drag."

Daphnia makes the decision to attack first. She has grown impatient with the Hippie, and she uses one of her abilities against him. She might have said she could fly, but it isn't true. She can stay in the air for a long time, but it isn't flying. It's a really long jump. I almost didn't see her jump out of her chair and land in front of Hippie. She would've tackled him, but the Hippie had expected it, and he moves back in time so she doesn't hit him. The Hippie raises his hand and gives her one of his blasts. It strikes her in the chest. It isn't a big one, but it's a big enough blast to knock her backward. She's always been strong. She recovers and this time she's able to fly forward and knock the old hero down. Rudy joins her, and I know the Hippie is in trouble against the two of them.

I make a choice, I won't attack my brother, and I decide to go after the Beat. I'm fast enough to get to the Beat before he can react to me. I jump on top of the table and land a hard punch against his cheek.

He gets a weak punch back at me, but I deflect it and know I need to press my attack before he can react to me. I jump down off the table, and we turn to face each other. I know how to get off quick punches, and I place a right and a left jab at him. He has to back up again to defend himself.

Luckily for me, my brother hasn't attacked me. I can't see where he is or what he's doing. I hope he doesn't attack me.

I don't have time to think about him any longer, and I need to keep my attack up on the Beat.

I'm distracted by my own thoughts and it gives the Beat a chance to hit me. This time he punches me much harder. He strikes me in the jaw. I can feel the pain as he strikes the side of my face. I know he's knocked out a tooth. It's a back molar.

I won't quit until I've finished. I give him punch after punch and kick after kick. I'm hitting him so many times, I don't even know what is happening around me. I don't what is happening to Rudy, Daphnia, or Spike. My focus is on the Beat. I won't give him a chance to recite one of his deadly poems. I won't quit. I won't stop hurting him. He's at a disadvantage. He's losing this fight, but I won't stop. His body is my

punching bag. I'm beating him good, but he won't go down. He won't quit, but he's done.

"He's finished, Tiger," says the voice of Smokey. I'm not expecting him here, but there he is standing behind me. I turn to look at him. He looks tired and the large man is breathing hard. He's back in his man form, but I can tell he has just transformed himself back from being a bear. "He's done. It's over. The Beat is on the ground, and he isn't going to stand anytime soon. Right now we are waiting for the paramedics and police. He's going to jail, but first, he's going to the hospital. You sure did a number on him."

I ask, "Where's Spike?" I look around to see where my dog Spike is. He's at my feet. "It's okay, boy," I say. "Everything is okay. I'm right here, boy."

Smokey says to Hippie, "I thought maybe you were on your way out of the country again." Smokey is trying to make a joke but nobody understands him.

I look around to see where he's sitting. When I see him, my I find him sitting at the table. He looks okay, tired but okay.

The Old Hippie says to Smokey, "Be quiet." He thinks he's made a joke, but the rest of us don't understand his sense of humor.

Smokey looks satisfied with himself. He looks around to see some of his handy work. He finally says, "I gave your brother a chance. I wasn't going to fight him, but he wouldn't back down. He attacked me. What could I do?"

"I'm sorry. There's nothing you could do. I wish I could've stopped him, but sometimes there's nothing I could do about him either," I say. Spike has jumped on my leg, and I reach down and give him the attention he's seeking. "I wanted to save Rudy, but instead I've made a mess of everything and I took my frustrations out on the Beat.

Spike is okay. I'm expecting him to stay next to me, but he doesn't. Instead, he walks over and lays at Hippie's feet.

"I'm afraid it's too late for your brother. I'm sorry to say this, but he's a traitor. He made up his mind a while ago. He might've decided which side he wanted to be on before he stayed in the Auxiliary Corps.

He needed a way out. The Hippie told me about the microchip, but that wasn't it. Sometimes villains don't know they're villains. They have to get the opportunity to be a villain first." Smokey turns away from me and looks over at Hippie, and a look of concern comes over his face. "That's what Daphnia and the Beat gave your brother. They gave him the opportunity he was looking for. There's nothing me, you, or even the whole Auxiliary Hero Corps could've said to him to change his mind."

"There's always something we could do," I say, "I know I'll always blame myself for what my brother did."

"There's nothing you could do. You're not perfect. But being around you doesn't make people want to become agents of evil." He moves away from me and towards Hippie. The man-bear keeps talking and he says to Hippie, "Are you okay, Hippie?"

"Something is wrong with Hippie," I say getting up and moving to him as fast as I can.

The Hippie is slumping forward. Smokey gets to him first, but it's too late, the old hero has fallen off the chair and onto the ground.

"Call an ambulance," I say.

Smokey says, "They're on their way. The Old Hippie is in bad shape. This isn't good." Spike has moved out of the way, but my dog keeps looking at the fallen hero, and I know he's just as concerned about the Hippie as Smokey and me.

I look around and Daphnia and Rudy must have left when the fight wasn't going their way. Daphnia was smart, and she must've had an escape route planned just in case things went bad. I wished she hadn't taken my brother with her. But I would have to worry about the two of them later. Right now, I wanted to make sure I got Hippie to the hospital.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the Journal of Rahi 'The Destroyer' Gupta, Ganges River, India

JUST AFTER I FINISHED UNIVERSITY, my father died. On the day of the cremation, my eldest friend sat me down when I lived in Windsor. He told me it was my responsibility to take my father's ashes back to India and perform a ritual burial. It's the submerging of the ashes in the Ganges, under the guidance of a Hindu priest.

According to our beliefs, the Ganges bridges the gap between us and the gods. The idea of taking part in such an important ritual in India was lonesome and scary. I had grown up in Britain, attended the local schools, and I was never taught Hindi or Punjabi.

I heard stories of adventure, in which the traveler reaches a destination and undergoes a revelation.

It was there in India on the river with my father's ashes in one hand. In the other hand, I held on to his uniform which he wore his whole life. He had been a member of the Garhwali Brotherhood of Heroes. While I was sitting there I looked around and saw none of his brothers there because they all had died so long ago. I decided I wouldn't become a hero

but I would become something else instead, and I would become something new and better. If I needed to become like the demons of I would. I decided at the river to take an old name. I have made it my point to be a demon. I have chosen a different path than my father, and I have decided to battle heroes.

I know there's one hero out there who is my equal. When he fights me, we will fight to the death. Yet, I could see him while I was standing in the sacred water. My nemesis doesn't cross the line of morality he's set for himself. The sacred river has made him clear. He protects a bear and a royal princess. I also see he still has to fight and battle his own brother before he faces me. But I will fight him and win. His own family will have to spread his ashes when I'm finished with him. Maybe they will bring his ashes here to reunite them with the gods.

I still need to grow my army. My grandfather would've refused my technology, my chip, and the surgery, but there are others who won't. Many will benefit from my skills and my technology. I have earned skills as a healer. I have power, great wealth, and I know how to use them all. I will never need to reunite with the gods after death because I know I will become one of them instead.



The sounds of beeps and pings fill the Hippie's hospital room with noise. Every sound in the room has a meaning. There's nothing hidden in those sounds. They all have an importance. All the wires hooked up to Hippie, make him look small and fragile in his bed. The doctors told us to wait and see.

Smokey is standing next to Hippie's bed. He takes up most of the space. Also in there is the Lady Jane and Smitty. I'm also there. I think the remote control is on Hippie's bed, but I'm not close to it.

A nurse comes in. She looks annoyed with us, and I think she's waiting for the chance to kick us out.

My brother and Daphnia fled when Smokey attacked. The bear and The Hippie were too much for them, and neither stood a chance.

The Auxiliary Hero Corps says they fled the city. Smitty and the higher-ups keep telling me they will be found, but I'm not so certain.

The Corps hadn't found the Beat or the Black Shirt before. So why should I believe they would be able to find Rudy and Daphnia?

Smokey is talking to Hippie even though the man is unconscious. There's nothing for us to do, but we still wait. When Smokey gets tired of talking to Hippie, he turns to me, "None of this should've happened. He was Hippie's nemesis. He wasn't yours."

A silence falls over the room, and all I can hear are the machines hooked up to Hippie, and they check him. The machine measuring his heart is the loudest, and it's the one in to which my ears seem most in tune.

"Smokey, give the kid a break," says the Lady Jane trying to defend me. "We can't go back and fix the past."

Smokey gives her a look and says, "The code protects us. That's why we have it. The Beat was Hippie's foe. Valentine is still a kid, a recruit, and he needed to follow orders."

Smitty speaks up and says to Smokey, "Valentine is clear of any wrong doing. The Corps will clear him and that will be the end of it as far as we're concerned."

Smokey doesn't care what Smitty says, and I can see it in his eyes. He's unhappy with me. He doesn't care what anyone else has to say. "If I told Valentine once, I told him a thousand times about Hippie's nemesis."

"Give him a break. It was his brother and a friend. You can't expect him to fight his brother could can you?" asks Jane hoping to find some sympathy.

She hadn't known Smokey as long as I had, and I knew he wouldn't listen to her or anybody else and logic would escape the old bear.

"So he expects me to fight them and defend Hippie. I knew them too. But what Valentine did, there's no excuse."

Smitty says, "Daphnia and Rudy killed Hippie. Remember it wasn't Valentine who killed him. I know you're angry but you're mad at the wrong person."

“People, could we take this to the hallway?” asks the nurse, but she isn’t asking, she is demanding. “I think it’s time for everyone to leave.” With that, she points to the door.

We all start to leave the hospital room except Smokey who wants to say something to her, but he keeps his mouth shut. I think he wants her to say something to him again before he’ll leave his friend. I don’t think he’s going to leave when it happens. The machine monitoring the Hippie makes a flat sound, and before any of us turn and look at it an alarm goes off in the room.

The nurse is the first to say something, “Get out now. There are too many of you in here. I need this space cleared.”

Even Smokey couldn’t argue with her now. We leave the room and wait in the hallway. A team of nurses dressed in their blue scrubs walks into the hospital room. While we wait outside, doctors and nurses go back and forth, and we don’t know if Hippie is still alive. We stay in the hall for forty-five minutes before one of the doctors comes out and tells us The Old Hippie has died.

It’s a young doctor who tells us the news. I listen to his words. He knows why the Hippie has died, but he won’t tell us the reason because we aren’t Hippie’s family.

Smitty asks, “Do I know you, Dr. Gupta? You seem familiar to me.”

Another doctor joins the young doctor and says, “You have seen Dr. Gupta’s work on TV. He’s revolutionizing integrating microchip surgery into the patient’s brain. It’s opening up a whole new world of treatments and cures. We are just waiting for approval, and I think we can start testing in mice in the next few years.”

Smitty says, “Maybe that’s it.”

One of the nurses comes out of the room. There’s nothing we can do, and everyone starts to leave. The nurse wouldn’t let us go in to see our friend. The Lady Jane leaves first, and she’s soon followed by Smitty. Finally, Smokey and I are the only ones left standing there. He’s turned away from me and he won’t acknowledge that I’m even there. I turn and walk towards the elevators. It’s a long walk from where I had been standing. It seems to take a long time for me to reach

the elevator so I can start to leave the hospital and return to my apartment by myself.

Catching the elevator is Dr. Gupta. He was there before I got there to push the down button on the wall, and he asks "Going down?"

"Thanks," I said, still trying to process everything that had happened tonight. I want to go home but the elevator seems to be taking forever.

"I am glad you are here. I was hoping to speak to you," says Dr. Gupta with a British accent. "You're Valentine Vega aren't you?"

I look at him, and I wait for him to say something else, but it's Smokey who interrupts us.

Smokey says to me, "I'm sorry, friend. I didn't mean anything I said back there." He puts out his hand for me to shake it. "I'm sorry." It takes me a moment, but I do take it and shake his hand. That's the way he is. He is easy to place blame and then ask for forgiveness. Smokey has always been this way, and I am learning to get used to him.

I look back over at Dr. Gupta. He's** glances away as soon as I look at him. I think I see something in his eyes, but it isn't what I'm expecting. It's hatred. It's directed towards me.

The elevator rings to signal its approach, and when he hears it, Smokey says, "Let's go. This has been another bad night in a long line of bad nights."

Dr. Gupta excuses himself from Smokey and me and says he has left his keys at the nurses' station, and he needs to go back and get them.

"He seems like an agreeable fellow," says Smokey as the doctor leaves us alone at the elevator.

"I don't know," I say. "If you ask me, there's something not right about him."

CHAPTER FIVE

From the Old Hippie overheard at Stanley Park.

“SCENERY IS ALWAYS BETTER with a pretty girl standing in the background. Too bad it’s so cold out here.”



I had asked for a transfer, but I don’t know if it will get approved. I still have to go out on watch with Smokey and the Lady Jane every night, and I haven’t forgotten what Smokey said to me at the hospital.

I moved out of my apartment and back into my grandmother’s house. I keep telling myself it’s to protect her. My grandmother is happy to have me back home, but I know I might be putting her or my sister’s lives in danger. Sometimes it better to be at home than out in the world on my own.

Spike, he’s happy. He likes to walk in the neighborhood. The dog likes the food my grandmother slips him underneath the table when she thinks I’m not looking. He likes the bed in my old bedroom because it’s

much bigger than the one in my apartment. In Spike's mind, everything is much better.

Smokey thinks everything is okay between us now. I still meet him at the Templeton every night, I laugh at his jokes, and I watch him eat his food before we start our patrol. But I'm going through the motions, and I don't want to be in the Corps anymore.

At my grandmother's house, her grandchildren are expected to stay with her until they are married. She's traditional. A man is expected to work. So, I go to my job every night hoping it keeps her happy. Before I leave tonight, I go downstairs and the TV is on. My grandmother is sleeping in her chair in front of the television. She likes to watch the novellas on the Spanish channel, but I know she's been asleep for a while because now there's soccer on instead. My presence must have woke her because I see her eyes open and she smiles up at me. "Come sit at my feet, I want to talk to you, but I do not want to make you late for your job."

I sit on the sofa, and she moves her tiny legs so I have plenty of room to sit with her. "I'm not going to be late. I have a little time before I have to go."

"It's good to have you home with us. It's where you belong. That's much better isn't it?"

"Yes, much better."

"I know, and I'm happy you are home again." She's silent for a second, and she says to me, "I want Rudy home too."

"I don't think so. But he's wanted by the police."

"The police want everyone nowadays, but they don't need our Rudy."

"I don't know."

"Yes, I want Rudy to come home, and I want you to fix it so he can come back to my house...so he can live under my roof again. He needs your guidance, and he needs his family," she says. When she's finished speaking, she closes her eyes. "Please turn off the TV when you leave."

I get up, walk over to her, bend down, and kiss her on the cheek. "I love you, Grandmother."

“And you’ll do what I ask?”

“Yes...yes, I will,” I say, and I take the blanket and cover her.

She smiles, and shuts her eyes, “Don’t forget the television.”

“I won’t.” I walk over to the TV and hit the button to turn it off. The room is dark. I say one more thing to her before I go to my job. “Grandmother, you know I will bring him back. I want him to come home as much as you do.”

“I know you will. You’re a good boy.”

My cell phone rings. It’s the Corps. There will be a memorial service for Hippie, but it’s too soon to know when it will be. I also found out the Beat and the Black Shirt were waiting in jail, and waiting for a court date in front of a judge. I end the call, and I know a great hero has died in our city.

There is nothing else I can do. I must leave for another patrol with my dog at my side. But I have been given a new mission by my grandmother. It’s more important to me, and I won’t place the Auxiliary Hero Corps above my family ever again.

I will bring Rudy back home.

DAPHNIA FIGHTS BACK

CHAPTER ONE

From Unknown

'But, what happens when she's your Juliet but you're not her Romeo?'

THE FAT CROW IS A 'BIG BOY.' I mean he's really a big boy, and he's fighting me. He throws a punch. I dodge it. He throws two more quick punches at me. I step back. All I have to do is stay out of his range. His arms are longer than mine, and he's just as quick. If he lands a punch he'll knock me out. I have fought him before, and I know his weakness. He throws another punch. It's close to my face. If it had been an inch closer, my nose would be gushing blood. I get lucky. He has overextended himself. I get one quick rabbit punch in with my left hand. There are ribs there, but I don't think it's hard enough to break one of them. He's got one more punch in him. He crosses with his own left. I jump back. The fight is over. The Fat Crow is out of breath.

He's over six feet five inches tall, a good three hundred-fifty pounds. And luckily, for me he has asthma. His asthma is immense as he is large. He puts his hand up to postpone the fight. I have always thought he looks like the original Mexican Bob's Big Boy.

The Crow goes to his knees. I could finish him off, but instead. I give him my hand. I hold it out and wait for him. He's catching his breath. He'll be okay; I hope. I ask, "Where's your inhaler?"

He remembers he has one. It's in his pants pocket. The Fat Crow takes it out and takes a puff on it. He reaches up, and I help him to his feet. I'm strong, but it takes all my strength to get him standing up. That's the hardest part of this workout.

"What are you going to do with the rest of your day?" he asks being friendly, but his voice always sounds like gravel.

"I don't know."

"I bet you are going to see Juliet."

"Shut up," I say.

"Why are you blushing?" The Crow has a way of seeing through people. "She's pretty. I don't blame you for liking her. I wished I like someone as beautiful as her. You're lucky."

I look at my feet. If this were a fight, the Crow would be landing the punches now. Darn him.

He starts quoting some old poem at me, "At this same ancient feast of Capulet's. Sups the fair Juliet whom thou so lovest, with all the admired beauties of Verona: go thither; and, with an untrained eye, compare her face with some that I shall show, and I will make thee think thy swan a crow."

Not fair using words at me. I am vulnerable. He's landed the knockout punch with them. I think I might have even staggered backward. It's not fair; who is quoting?

"It's okay, cousin. We have all been in love."

Yes, he's a relative of mine. My aunt's oldest.

My family is sad. Especially about Rudy. He's my little brother, and now he was in a federal prison. A ten years sentence. It could've been longer, but Smokey and I spoke up for him in court. Had I done enough? Nope. Had I promised my grandmother I would find a way and set him free? Yes, I did. Did my grandmother ask when I would set him free? At first, almost every day. Now, she doesn't ask any longer. Did she still expect me to keep my promise? Yes.

While the Fat Crow, sort of looks like a crow. He wears black clothes all the time. He even wears a black baseball cap with a large crow on it. I don't know where he got it, but he's had it on his head for the last year. He likes shiny things. He always wears silver necklaces. He also likes to repeat things.

He pats me on the back, and he makes his way out of the gym. He says to me before he leaves, "I'll see you later, Cuz."

I have a date with the prettiest girl I know. It's Juliet, and she's gorgeous, but she's always late. Where did we meet? We met at one of the only few places where I don't have to deal with the Auxiliary Hero Corps. That's church. Sunday mornings aren't always the easiest because Saturday night is the finish of my long work week, but I hadn't slept by the time I went to church.

I also get Mondays off from the Corps, and this afternoon, I'm waiting for her. It's nice out, and I'm heading to Library Square, but I have forgotten something. Spike is still on my chest. Who is Spike? He's my dog, my tattoo dog, and he comes to life when I touch him. Juliet hasn't had a chance to meet him. I figured it might be best to wait to introduce him to you now.

It's a rare winter day, and the sun is still out. I didn't know what the two of us would end up doing, but I didn't care. I just liked being around her. Yup, I'm in love.

It's my day off. I'm a member the Auxiliary Hero Corps. Who are we? Are we superheroes? Not yet. We're in training. The minor leagues. Some will make it to the Hero Corps, but most of us won't. I still have my chance.

My brother, he'll never get another chance? He had his chance. He betrayed us. He became a traitor. Rudy made his bed with another traitorous villain, Daphnia. While she remained free, my brother remained in jail. Am I going to get him free of his prison? Yes, I am. I will get him out of jail because I made a promise to my grandmother. I always keep my word. But my grandmother also knows I have the heart of a hero. I'll get Rudy free the right way, the legal way. But lately, I have thought maybe that isn't the best way to set my brother free?

There were other. Much faster ways of doing it. I don't know what to do.

I walk by Satan's Grove. It's dark and creepy. I have a hard time looking in there. I have never really been in there. It's next to the park where I'm going to meet Juliet, and it's a part of the city that has never been developed. I hear a voice, it's an evil one, but I want to walk towards it. I think I also see a pair of yellow eyes, but they disappear. Were they animal eyes? I don't know. I want to step in there. Something is drawing me inside. I take a few steps. What's in there? I almost feel I'm in a dream.

I feel a hand grab my shoulder. "Don't go in there, Cuz...only evil lurks in there. Are you dumb enough to go in there?" It's the Crow's raspy voice. He must've followed me from the gym. "Haven't you heard about this place? You lose everything if you go in there."

"Of course I have," I say.

"Then don't go in," says the Crow. "You don't want to go where the Snare lives...isn't your lady waiting for you?"

The Crow says something that surprises me. "I hate to lose a real hero. I know in my heart you're going to be a Flyer someday. When I was a kid, I also wanted to be a Flyer, but I know that's never going to happen. I see it in you. I know a Flyer when I see one."

"I'm not a hockey player. I don't think the Philadelphia Flyers will ever draft me." I knew what he means, but as I try to make a bad joke. I never pictured myself as a Flyer. That's the rarest kind of hero. Will, I fly? It's only a daydream. I know what I forgot to do. I'm supposed to meet Smokey. I snap out of my daydream, and I remember Juliet. I can still meet Smokey, but it will have to be quick. I say, "You're right. But first I have to go."

I leave the Fat Crow. I run across the street. I turn back to look at him. I'm not sure, but I think I see him step into the grove. A truck passes me, and I'm really late. Smokey gets angry when I'm late. I run even faster.

CHAPTER TWO

From Colonel Harlan S. Sanders

*'Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour
upon the stage like a chicken.'*

"WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE?" asks Smokey. The man is big and he likes his flannel. He has always had a beard, but not the kind of beard that is fashionable now. His looks like a raccoon is living on his face. He's a bear without his power, and he's also a bear with it. That's what he literally turns into a bear. A big brown one. Smokey is half-man, half-bear, and I know I like the bear better than the man. He's in man form now, too bad.

"Nothing has happened to my face. What do you mean?" I say turning to see him behind me.

"It's just that you...there's something. Something, I haven't seen before of that ugly mug of yours, Val. Something I thought I have never seen on your face. What is it?" Smokey is smiling, and he walks around the bench, and he sits next to me.

"What? What do I have on my face?" I ask as I touch it with my right hand.

Smokey takes his meaty finger and touches me right on my sweet part of my sour puss. "It's right there. I have seen this before. But you got it bad. You got it real bad, kid." He's smiling at me with his grizzly grin. Valentine Vega, you're in love...it's love. You've got it bad. There's love all over your face. Who's the unlucky girl?"

"You don't know her," I say. I'm being truthful.

Smokey gets serious and is having one of his Deliverance movie moments, at least he hasn't asked me to 'Squeal like a pig!' Smokey can be frightening, but for now, he was on my side. I could use you there's something going on, and I can use your help."

"I have no other reason to be here, but I'm not working today. I'm meeting my girl in a few minutes. There's nothing else I want to do."

"The girl I don't know. That's a pity, Val. We used to be close. Smokey just smiles at me. He says, "Sometimes you act just like a Flyer." Smokey gets up and walks away from me. I hope he believes me when I told him I'm there to meet Juliet. He says one last thing to me "I still work for the Corps, and some of us still have a job to do. I could use your help when you're done with your girl."

I say to myself, "What do you know? Old Bear, you wouldn't know a Flyer if he swooped down and took your toupee off your head." I look and see Smokey. Has he followed me here? Our eyes meet, but he walks away. Where is he going? I continue to wait on the bench. It's now time for the office workers to leave the sunshine and return to the artificial light of their cubicles. I didn't have that kind of job. I work outside, and I work at night. Smokey goes over and starts talking to two police officers.

Smokey is still talking to the same cops. More cops. And some of them are in their riot gear. Something is going down. I'm surprised by Smokey because the Corps and the Cops are not traditionally friends. Both groups don't like each other, but today they seem to like working with each other.

Juliet isn't here yet. Has she forgotten about me? Am I too late? Am

I'm doomed to sit on this bench for the rest of my life? I know my heart is going to break.

"Hi, Sweet Cheeks. Have you been here long," says the woman I'm not waiting for. It's Daphnia. But she's not dressed the way I'm expecting. She dressed as a park's employee. I almost could mistake her for one. The last time I saw her she had run away from me at the Vogue Theater. She had killed my friend, Old Hippie. She looks at my face, and says, "Move over Cutie Pie. I know I'm allergic to polyester. I hate the smell...oh, for the unenlightened they think I just go out with a care in the world. But I put a lot of thought into this look. In fact, I put way too much thought into this little meeting of ours."

I still don't know what to say to her.

"It's a good thing you're so good-looking because sometimes you don't have a lot to say. It's okay. Just sit there and listen. I don't have much time." She touches my palm with her hand. It sends electricity through me. "You need to leave the Corps. It's too dangerous. Things are changing in this city, and the Corps can't see what is really going on. You're in danger, and you don't know it."

I say, "I'm not joining you. I didn't join you before. I won't change my mind now. Not after what you let happen to Rudy."

"I miss Rudy too. Don't get me wrong, but I've only come to warn you. Don't you think I'm going to risk my neck for the Corps? The police? Smokey? I've come here because of you? You're my friend. You don't know what's going on. This isn't a good time to be a part of the team. This is a good time to be a free agent. A lone wolf."

I look, there are more police arriving. Smokey is still helping orchestrate their lines. I wondered how he would feel if he knew the woman he is looking for is sitting right next to me. There are more people. Is this a protest? A rally? "What's going on?"

"I'm leaving. The only thing that's going to take place here is evil and chaos, but I'm its conductor. I'm only a minor player. People are going to die today."

"Why would you do this?"

"I've only thrown a little fuel on the fire. The flames were already

burning when I showed up. You would be surprised how little a small a fire it takes at first to burn down a house. It only takes the smallest flame," says Daphnia. She stands up. Adjust her shirt. When satisfied she says, "It's time for me to leave. Please don't be heartbroken when I'm gone."

Daphnia walks away. Smokey is so close. I could have her arrested. I don't know. She was my friend, and I've always had a schoolboy crush on her. I let her walk away. That's the way we did things in my neighborhood. It's not a good excuse, but I don't care. She had been my friend, and I would never hand her over to the Cops.

But I still need to warn Smokey about the riot. I didn't want him to get hurt by Daphnia. I turn to look Daphnia. She's left. She's disappeared in the crowd of her people. All the police are now dressed in riot gear. The mob is starting to pick up any easy weapons they can find in the square. There's going to be a fight. Two armies are going to clash here, and all I can think about is finding my Juliet.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Come loving...give me my Romeo’

“YOU’RE LATE, but I’m glad you’re safe. I was worried about you.”
I say.

Juliet kisses me.

I kiss her back.

“What took you so long? I don’t know if I can forgive you for being so late,” I say.

“I’m sorry the day has escaped me...and Spike? Is he here?” She digs her hand underneath my shirt and places it on my chest. It’s the best feeling in the world. I don’t answer. Instead, I give her another kiss. Who knew I had another in me?

“That’s starting to make things better, but I only have a few minutes left in my lunch.” Juliet works for the Parks Department. She’s a horticulturist. She’s smart. “In a few minutes I have a meeting...the landscape architects have plans for the park. We’re looking to expanded it. A new pavilion...with walking paths. It’s going to make this space a jewel of the city again.”

"That's interesting." I really don't care. I try to kiss her again. I say "That's not very fair. It's not my fault you're late."

She looks into my eyes, and says, "Too many things are going on, but I will make it up to you tonight."

"But I have the rest of the day off. I thought maybe you could leave early and we could go someplace else," I say trying to look as gorgeous as possible." I know it's a losing battle, but sometimes even those battles need to be fought.

"That's not fair. My job is in the day, your's is at night."

"Maybe, I should go with you. There are some angry people here, and I don't want anything happening to you."

"They're not mad at me. People come to the park and protest all of the time," she says. She sighs, "I really don't want to go, but it's important."

I've lost...it's time to gather my troops and fall back. "Maybe after the meeting. I can pick you up. We could get something to eat and then maybe we can think of something else to keep us busy."

"Maybe...but now, I really have to go."

I watch her leave. Some women you never want to take your eyes off of them and Juliet is one of them. I stare at her as long as I can. I thought I might die when I lost sight of her. She nearly killed me by leaving, but I still managed to struggle through her absence.

"All you Romeos are exactly the same. They always think they're the first to be in love...and no one in the world knows how they feel."

It's Queen Mab. She looks at me with a very disapproving look.

"But?"

"But nothing. Queen Mab now needs your help."

"But it's my day off."

The large black woman takes my hand and pulls me along. Queen Mab used to be a man but not any longer. She used to be called Mercutio Jones, but that has changed along with her. We are getting closer to the line of protesters. She speaks louder so I can hear her, "Heroes don't get days off. Queen Mab doesn't get any days off and

neither do you. The party has already started and we're late. You know how I hate being late to parties."

This is not the girl I wanted to spend my afternoon with.

CHAPTER FOUR

A text overseen in the back-row of a freshman language arts class at William Jefferson Clinton High School or was it Twitter?

'Romeo and Juliet killed themselves for their love, so I think you can at least reply to my text.'

QUEEN MAB IS one of the first to pick up a beer bottle and throw it at the police. It doesn't reach them, but it breaks a few feet in front of their line. I know Mab. She's a big woman. I guess he's a she now. Now, her name is Queen Mab. She's younger than me and went to school with my two older sisters. She's also angry, but after she throws the bottle she retreats behind other protesters. The rest of the rioters are picking up any other objects they can throw.

I yell at her, "What are you doing?" Queen Mab doesn't care.

The police are in full riot gear. They are wearing protective helmets and are carrying shields. The police have formed their own line. They are advancing forward with slow steps. Some of the police are banging their nightsticks against the shields and it makes an intimi-

dating sound. The police don't care if the situation escalates and they are looking forward to crossing the park and engaging the other side.

I'm in a bad spot. I need to get out of here. I get hit by a rock. Luckily, it mostly strings. It's a small one and it hits me in my shoulder. I look around, and I see a safe spot to get out-of-the-way. There's a gazebo across fifty yards of lawn with a bike path behind me.

"Val." It's Queen Mab. She motions me to come to her. I don't want to go. I look to the other battle line and see Smoky. He's changed into his full bear form. He's full of fur, and he's ready for a fight.

Smoke grenades. They're flying into the air. One lands at my feet. I go to Mab. She's waiting for me.

The rioters launch another volley of rocks and garbage. I'm running towards Mab. This time, they don't hit me.

The police return a volley of their own. Rubber bullets. They aren't meant to kill, but they still hurt when they hit me. One hits me in my calf. One hits me in my back. I start to stumble, but it didn't knock me down. Mab is in front of me. The big woman reaches out for me.

With the dark skin of her big arm, she reaches around me and helps guide me to a safer area. "Daphnia has sure stirred up the hornet's nest today. Hasn't she?"

"So have you. You've added fuel to the fire," I say. I don't need her help, but Mab insists. The first row of rioters passes us.

They say, "It's time for a change. It's time we mattered in our city." I couldn't hear anything else she says to me. The noise is too loud. There's too much going on all around us. Smoke fills the air. Mab is still talking, and I finally hear her say, "This city ignores the poor. They ignore everyone who doesn't have an address. They ignore the people who go to work every day but live in poverty. We tired of being ignored. It's time we are heard. That's why we came here. We came to listen to Daphnia today, but the police want to arrest her. We can't let that happen."

I hear the megaphone voice of a police officer and he tells everyone to leave the park. He tells everyone they will be arrested. It's too late. The violence has gone too far. Daphnia has thrown her match on a dry

powder keg and it has exploded in our face. I know Daphnia, and I'm pretty sure she's no longer here. She likes to pull strings, and over the past few months of her hiding, she's kept a very low profile. These people have listened to her. Daphnia had been busy since that night when the Corps had to stop her, killed the super-villains the Beat and the Blackshirt, and arrested my brother, Rudy. It had been a good night for the Auxiliary Hero Corps, but Daphnia wasn't dumb. She had learned from her mistake and this time she was going to ignite our city in hate and fear.

"I'm okay," I say to Queen Mab getting up from the ground. "This is fun."

"There's no one who can dowse this, but Daphnia. She is the true queen, but now she's gone. She starts the fires, but she never puts them out," says Mab pulling on my arm. "Her wagon-spokes are made of long spiders' legs. The cover is made of grasshoppers' wings. The harness is the smallest spider's web. The collars around their necks are made of thin moonbeams. Her whip is made of a cricket's bone. The lash is made of film. Her charioteer is a small gray mosquito. The Corps won't find her. The police can't find her. And she only appears in front of you when she wants. Even Queen Mab only spies her for a moment. The inferno has no need of the flame."

Queen Mab takes me to a safe place. It's a large oak tree. I can watch the battle, but I know which side I should help. Which side? I didn't know the answer to the question. I say to Mab, "I have heard that speech before, but where? I can't place it."

She gives me a deep throaty laugh and says, "Oh, you're another failure of the public schools. I have always thought an education institution should do a better job highlighting the classics."

The only thing I could say is, "Sorry. I know a few things, but nothing like you."

"Two houses? Two star-cross lovers? I don't have time for this. There's fight, and I'm not fighting. How sad is that for a queen?" Queen Mab is finished with you. Time to fight, and then tonight it will be time for love. Maybe tonight Queen Mab will visit you, Val?"

I blush, and I still don't have much to say as politely as I can. "Ahh...no, thank you. You're highness, I think you can find much better suitor than me."

"Such is the loneliness of the royals." With that Mab turns and leaves. She runs back into the fight and leaves me standing underneath the tree.

I look for Smokey. I spot him. The bear is knocking down protesters with the back of his paws. Mostly the other side opposing him just runs out of his way. Who wants to mix it up with Smokey? I like to call him when he's like this, in Spanish, *Oso Viejo*, the old bear. He's big and fierce, and nobody wants to mess with him. I know Smokey. He might be angry, but he's taking it easy on them. I don't think even Spike and I could stand up to him when he's full of fur.

The police march forward with their shields. They are still banging on them with their batons. When they reach within feet of the rioters, they lock their shields and form a wall. I had read about this technique once, at the police were using the time-honored fighting method called the 'shield wall.' The ancient technique seems to work just as well for our police. They stacked their long shield against the ground in groups of three. One shield in front protecting the police from the protester directly in front of them. All of the shields form a wall in front of the angry mob, and the protesters can't get through it. It's impressive. Rocks and bottle strike the shields. The police line holds and the rioters can't do anything to them for now.

The only one not protected with the shields is Smoky, and the protesters attack him. The bear is in between the police and the mob, and he's got no place to go. How did this happen? Since they can't hurt the cops, they take their anger out on the bear. A new volley of bottles and rocks fly towards him and many of them strike him. A beer bottle breaks against his head, and Smokey turns and growls in the direction it came.

I hold my breath.

This encourages the crowd and now all of them start throwing things at the bear. Smokey turns to retreat towards the police, and he

charges their shields. The lines are firmly in place. They aren't going to let the bear through the wall. Smokey hits the wall at full speed. Half-dozen cops are thrown in the air like dolls.

It's time for me to act. I quickly take off my shirt. I need to get to Spike. He asleep. I should say he's really a tattoo, and he needs my touch so he can come to life. I get to him, and I touch my chest. He jumps out and lands on the ground. He looks at the fight in front of us, and my dog is ready. My dog will follow me into any fight.

I run across the lawn. There are those old trees again. I have never noticed the trees before today. Some of them are dying and it looks to me like the city has neglected this section of the park.

I hear a voice in my head, "Valentine." I stop running. It's eerie-creepy and old. I turn and look around. I don't see anyone. When I look towards the trees, I hear the voice again.

"Valentine."

I start moving again. I have doubts about what I heard. I look towards the trees, and I think I see Juliet with an old man. I hear the voice one last time.

"Valentine, I have Juliet."

CHAPTER FIVE

From King Lear 2: Electric Disco-Drama

'Everyone has their fate and the more people try to avoid it, the more trouble they get into. Just hop away like a kangaroo.'

IT'S easy to get into a fight; it's much harder getting out of it.

I hit the first protester attacking Smoky. He's not as big as me, but he's tough. In fact, he's tougher than any civilian should be. He's able to take my punch. My only advantage is he doesn't know how to fight. He telegraphs his moves. He steps and uses the same hand he's going to hit me with. I easily dodge it. I could have knocked him out with a few counter punches, but we aren't the only two here in the park. There are hundreds of rioters and all want to hit me, kick me, or throw things at me. Right now, the odds are one hundred to one against Smokey and me.

Spike comes to help. Bites the man's arm. Clamps his jaws down, and the man's no longer interested in fighting me. I order Spike to release him, and when free, the man runs back into the crowd.

Smokey is fighting off three rioters and two police officers. One of

the rioters is on his back. The bear is strong, but there are too many trying to hurt him.

There are too many variables out here. How can I help Smokey? Protect Spike? And watch my back? I move towards Smokey. This time, I need to fight the cops. Two of them are holding batons and shields, and they are looking to hurt me. Spike doesn't wait and he charges the nearest one. Out of nowhere, there's another dog, a police K-9, and the two of them are going at it each other. The police dog is trained, but he's still not a match for Spike. The other dog soon turns and runs. Instead of staying with me, Spike runs after him. This sucks. Spike is on his own, but I can help Smokey.

There is so much fighting. So much violence. The fight became something else. It became a dance. I had once gone to the ballet with my sister. There, the Sugar Plum Fairy leaped, spun, and made her way across the stage. Soon all the ballet company joined her and the dancers filled the stage. It was beautiful.

The same thing is happening here. Everyone had a part to play everyone moved with the grace and ease of a ballet dancer. We might not be dancers, but we knew where to move. The police moved forward. The rioters would retreat. The rioters would take their turn, and gain a few steps, and the police would fall back. The only two who hadn't rehearsed their parts were Smokey and me. That's why we had to fight both sides. There was a dance taking place and two of us didn't know what to do. We fought when we shouldn't, and retreated to the wrong side when we shouldn't have. We fought in a sea of violence, and the two of us were always swimming against the riptide. Smokey and I needed to get away.

I finally reach Smokey. He doesn't see me, and when I place my hand on his front haunch. He turns and growls at me. When he sees me, a look of relief comes over his bear face. Hey, this isn't the first time I've looked into his brown eyes. He knew he had one ally here, and that ally would always be me.

"Come on!" I say. "We need to get someplace safer." First, I would get Smokey out of harm's way, and then I would need to find Spike. I

think we are close enough to the same group of trees I had found shelter in earlier. I point to them. "Let's go over there!"

Smokey grunts and follows me.

I had done my duty. I had protected Smokey. When we reached safety, the bear walks away. He's finished. He'll go home, and I hope I'll see him tonight at the Templeton. We needed to part company now, but I didn't know if we'll ever be on the same side again. I glanced at him one more time. Smokey found a bench, changed back into human form, and sat down on it. He looked old, and I knew Smokey's days with the Corps were almost over. He might not be finished today or tomorrow, but he would quit soon. I could tell he's tired of his life in the Corps. His body couldn't take it any longer, and I knew he had lost his will also. The Corps had let him down and so had life. I felt bad for the bear, but there was nothing else I could do.

Smokey says to me, "I'm tired. I woke up so alive this morning, but I'm not alive any longer. I'm dead on my feet. I'm a walking corpse. I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

"There's nothing else we can do. The Corps can't help anyone here. Go home." I lie and say, "Things will look better in the morning." I would find him tonight. We would talk. I might even be able to make him laugh. I hoped he would go home. To eat some food. To get some sleep.

I still need to find Spike.

As the smoke clears so have most of the protesters. They leave. The energy is gone. The police arrest many of them. In the middle of the park, an ambulance drives towards us. A group of officers clears a path. I see where the vehicle goes. Police are giving first aid to someone who has fallen in the skirmish. I know who it is. It's Mercutio Jones. My friend. Queen Mab has fallen. I move towards her. Some of the cops recognize me and they let me through. The paramedics are performing CPR on her, but everyone knows she's dead. They load her body into the ambulance and the white vehicle drives away. More ambulances are coming, and many of the protesters and cops will need to go the hospital. The park is littered

bodies and trash everywhere, and hopefully, the bodies will be collected first.

My dog? Where's Spike? Fear grips me. I'm worried. Have you ever lost a pet? I could only think of one thing worse. Losing a child. Spike isn't a child. He's only my dog, but we're still close. We're friends. I scan the park. There's no sign of him. I remember the direction he went when he chased the police dog.

I walk to the edge of the park. There are even more people standing around. Some of them were protesters. Some of them were spectators. They all seem like they're actors waiting offstage. And they are waiting for their cue before they make their entrance into the next scene. Nobody wants to leave because they want to see what will happen next. Will there be another clash with the cops?

I see my dog. Spike is on a leash, and a woman on top of a small hill at the park's edge is holding his tether. The woman has her back turn to me. Is it Juliet? Could it be her?

CHAPTER SIX

From Leo of House DiCaprio

‘What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.’

IT STARTS TO RAIN, but I’m sure. It’s not a hard rain. Neither is it a gentle one. It’s enough rain that I got wet, but it wasn’t enough for a shower. There is something you hope the rain will wash away, but I never want the image of Juliet washed from my mind. I hope the Rains of Castamere will never find me. Where am I?

The woman turns towards me. I look. She’s still beautiful. It’s Juliet. It’s unreal, but I don’t care. I want to get closer to her.

I hate to admit that I’m the kind who falls in love at first sight, but I am. And if you saw her you would fall in love with her too. Juliet had leashed my dog, Spike wasn’t going any place. Maybe he has fallen in love with her too. I always knew he was smart. Spike doesn’t even wag his tail when he finally notices me. Right now he sure wasn’t my best friend.

“Is this your dog?” says Juliet to me knowing the answer. She is

holding a piece of the robe she is using as Spike's leash. My dog doesn't like them, but he's under her spell too. She says, "He is such a handsome dog I hate for him to get lost out here."

I only could nod my head. How could I speak? Could Da Vinci speak when he first saw Mona Lisa on the streets of Florence? As soon as she found out he was mine she handed me back his leash. I'm finally I'm able to croak out a few words and I say, "Thank you." I think I will always fall in love with her each time I see her.

A smile fills her lips and my Juliet says teasing me, "I know your name. Is it Valentine Vega? Isn't it?" She couldn't look any prettier if she wanted to. I know I'm stupid because I'm in love. Maybe it's me. I seem to fall in love too easily all the time.

Do I dare reach out and touch her hand?

Juliet says, "I have to go now, but I'm glad I got to talk to you. I want to give you this." I don't know what she wants to hand me. I know you're shy; I think that's really cute." Some of her hair has fallen across the front of her face. The part that covers her left eye she brushes it away with her hand. "Maybe...when you're not so shy you could give me a call sometimes?"

Some sounds come out of my mouth, but I know they aren't words.

I wake up.

Daphnia is kneeling next to me. She slaps me in the face again.

I say, "I'm awake." She has Spike; he's safe. I look around for Juliet. She's not there any longer. It had been a dream. I'm disappointed.

Daphnia says, "You passed out, Sweet Hips. But we are in trouble. The Soulless Snare must be near. He knows your weakness. It's a good thing I found you. The Snare has many traps for those who venture too close to his woods, and he nearly got you, but I think you're safe now."

I stand up.

She gives me an all-knowing look and asks, "Who were you dreaming about? Was it that other girl?"

I nod my head.

"So, let's go save your girlfriend. She's in danger. I hope we aren't too late."

CHAPTER SEVEN

'These violent delights have violent ends.'

***-Again, Shakespeare or is it Tupac? Sometimes I get the
two of them confused.***

I CAN SEE the Soulless Snare is sitting on a stump after we walk fifty yards into the glade surrounded by pine trees. He has Juliet with him. He's killing her. He's taking her soul. He doesn't seem too concerned about us, and in the fading light, I can see he isn't even looking at us. He's looking upwards at the branches of the trees. I touch the sword tattoo on my arm. It comes to life.

After a few moments, he says, "Do you hear the birds? Did you know there are two ways to kill songbirds? One way is to shoot them out of the branches. It takes longer, but it's much more satisfying." He looks down at us and smiles.

Daphnia says, "What's the other way?"

He replies, "Wait in the same place long enough and the little birds will eventually come to you. That's what I have done. You have come to

me. It has taken awhile, but I'm much more satisfied than I actually am. The long wait has made me so hungry. Some of the most delicious song-birds in the city have just flown into my lap, and now what should I do the you three of you? Should I let you birds fly free, or should I greedily devour you? It's such a big decision for me to make so quickly."

The Soulless Snare is an old man. He could be any old man sitting on a park bench. The kind no one looks at or cares about because they think they are harmless and have no value. The Soulless Snare is no one, but as I can look closer, I can see he's deadly. He's so deadly, and I know I have never faced a foe like this before.

Daphnia laughs and says, "Listen, I think you should be much more afraid of us. Sugar, we might not let you live...have you thought about that? Do I look like anyone's caged bird?" This bird might actually rip you apart with her talons."

The Soulless Snare laughs and says, "It's always the prettiest birds that make the most noise. I was hoping to eat you last, but maybe I should eat your soul first. I only wished you could share the pleasure I shall take away from you...I look forward to chewing on your soul's bones."

There's a smell in the oldest part of a forest. All of them in their darkest parts smell like death and rot. This is the way it smelled in this place. I could smell it all through the dampness. I shift on my feet. I'm uncomfortable here, it's the Soulless Snare's home, but there's no choice. We're going to have to fight for our lives.

Yellow eyes look at me from the trees. The dark hides everything, but their eyes. Soon one of them howls, and soon the pack howls.

The Snare laughs when he hears them, and the howls send a shiver up my spine. I attack. I rush forward. I hold my sword up high, and I'm hoping to land a hard blow when I reach him.

He's ready for me. He calls his hounds. They rush me from the shadows. Four legs are faster than two. I have to fight the hounds first. I take two of them out. A half-dozen more are on me. The creatures once were dogs, but now they're only nightmares. They knock me down.

Spike is the first one top of me. He's defending me. He gives me the seconds I need to get back to my feet.

I hear a cannon go off next to my head. It's not a cannon, but Daphnia's firing the biggest pistol I have ever seen. I can't hear, and I'm not sideways by the blast. Where was she hiding that hand cannon?

She's yelling at the hounds. "Do you feel lucky, Punks? This is a .44 Magnum it's the most powerful handgun in the world." She kills four more and her last shot hits a large dog in the head and taking it off. After she's finished shooting all of her rounds, I can't hear, but I still have enough hearing left to know she's out of rounds. Now the three of us are fighting the hounds by hand. I think the dogs have taken a pound of my flesh as my punishment for coming here. But in the end, there's only one left, and when he see he's outnumbered, he runs away.

I look at Spike first and he's okay, and then I look at Daphnia and she's okay too. It's nice to have her fighting on my side again. Between the three of us, we are all bruised, battered, and beat up, but we still can fight.

The Soulless Snare doesn't seem to care. He's still too involved with Juliet. I fear he is almost finished taking her soul and then she'll soon be dead. Satan's Grove is still his domain. We have to hurry if I'm going to save Juliet.

I run forward. Spike follows. I ready my sword.

The Snare finally looks up from Juliet. The old man puts up his hand for protection. I hear Spike yelp. He's knocked down. I'm about to strike him and he says, "There's nothing you can do. I have taken her soul. It is complete." Juliet rolls off of his lap, and she's laying face down on the ground. I change my plan. I go to her instead. The Snare laughs. He has won. He stands up to face me. Now, I still have three more souls to take. This day is going better than I have ever expected." He stands.

The snare is hit by a bullet. It's Daphnia and her cannon. The Snare flies backward, but he still stays on his feet. He looks shocked. Daphnia says, "Bitch, I'll smack ya up your dumb ass. Next time, I'm going to curb stomp ya face instead." I think she's mad.

I look at Juliet quickly. Do I need to take her to the hospital? And what about Spike?

Daphnia shouts at me, "There's still time to take it back, but first, we need to kill him before he gets away."

CHAPTER EIGHT

From Tupac

'Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real.'

THE SNARE LOOKS AT ME. He's not defeated, and he knows it. He slowly walks towards me. He continues to look at me, and he raises his arms.

I stop, and I can feel a blast of wind. It comes from behind and hits me in the face. I'm stopped in my tracks. I can barely hold onto my sword.

It's Daphnia who makes her way forward against the wind. The Snare's blast is so strong it kicks up dirt, leaves, and twigs that hit the both of us in the face. She doesn't care. She dodges a large tree limb that comes at her. I recover. I still can't hit him with my sword. The blast of air becomes stronger. It stings my face, and I have to squint. I'm close enough. I take a swing, but I only hit the air. The Snare isn't there. He's standing a few feet away. He's closer to Daphnia now. She tries to hit him, but he's gone when her fist reaches his face, he disappears. He laughs when he reappears. This old man is annoying.

He's closer to me now, but instead of swinging my sword. I throw instead. It surprises the Snare, but he disappears again.

The wind stops, and it's quiet in the grove. Where is he? The Snare reappears. But this time he's pulling the blade of my sword out of his gut. I got lucky. He closer to Daphnia, and as he takes out of his body. He's not laughing anymore, but the Snare has my weapon, and he's going to use it against Daphnia.

There are others here. It's Smokey and the Fat Crow. Smoky is much faster than the Crow. He's in his bear form, and the old brown bear reaches the Snare first.

The Snare attention is focused on Daphnia. He takes a swing at her. He misses. Daphnia backs away. She sees Smokey. The bear charges the Snare and knocks him down. The bear mauls the villain. He uses his claws to rip the Snare's flesh from his bone. The Snare screams. Smokey is going to kill the villain.

The Crow reaches us. He stands by me. He's out of breath.

There's another sound. It's lifeless roar. It's Smokey. The bear falls to his side. I see the sword's blade sticking out of him. He's motionless.

The Snare is lying on the ground, and he's laughing. He's a mess. His blood everywhere. "My last soul and it's the soul of a bear. I have taken two souls away from you today. I'm going to die with two more souls. I've defeated you." The old man coughs and blood comes out of his mouth.

My former friend takes the sword out of Smoky and walks over to the Soulless Snare.

I yell, "Don't!"

It's too late. She pushes my blade into the old man's chest.

"Why?" I ask. "It's not our way."

Daphnia says after she's made sure his dead, "But it's *My Way!*"

CHAPTER NINE

From A Midsummer's Night Dream

'My Soul is in the Sky'

ALL MY TATTOOS HURT, and the Fat Crow is making two new ones. He's taking his time. He wants to make them perfect. He says to me, "Do you want to see?" I think I got a mirror someplace.

"No, I trust you." I have been quiet for the past two weeks. I have only spoken to Crow and my Grandmother. I guess they are the closest in my life since Smokey and Juliet died in Satan's Grove.

Smokey was buried in with full honors from the Auxiliary Hero Corps. All of the Corps was there, and many of our city's officials were there also. Was he perfect? I know he wasn't, but I wished he were still alive.

Spike licks my face. He is worried and bored. I know he wants to go outside and play, but he smart enough to know I need to stay here for a little longer.

I didn't get to attend Juliet's funeral. Her family didn't want me there. Her two brothers showed up to see me. They told me the family

blamed me for her death, and it would be better for her family if I didn't show my face near their mother and father ever again.

"I made it into the Corps. I'm going to be a hero just like you," says Crow. "Once I finish my training, maybe I'll get to work with you someday."

"I don't feel like a hero," I say. The tattoo needle pricks a sensitive area, and I grimace.

"You're a hero. They're saying you're vital to the safety of our city and a bunch of other cool stuff...ya know good things. I'm almost finished your new tats. Come back in a few days and I'll finish them up for you. They're going to look good. They might even be my best tattoos yet."

Daphnia disappeared. She must have gone back to one her secret hiding places. I hoped she might show up for Smokey's funeral, but she didn't. She's too smart. I know she cared for Smokey, but she knew she would get arrested if she showed her face. She was a criminal, but she had saved my life. I wouldn't arrest her, but there are others who would. I know I'll see her again.

Crow asks, "Do you want to give them a try?"

I'm surprised, and I say, "They're ready. I didn't think I could until you finish them. If it's your best work, I had better take a look at them. I find a mirror and turn where I can see them. They are big, take up most of my back, and the Crow is right, they really are his best work. My wings are beautiful."

Crow says, "One wing for Smokey. One wing for Juliet."

I reach around and touch my back. First, I touch the left tattoo, and then the right. They come to life. I make the effort to fly. It's clumsy, but my wings lift me off the ground.

"You're going to be a Flyer. I told you so. A true superhero someday. One of the very few. And I'm going to tell everyone I made your wings for you," says Crow proudly.

I return to the Earth. Spike is wagging his tail at me. He approves. I say to myself quoting Tupac, "Things will never be the same, that's just the way it is." Was it Tupac, or was it Shakespeare? I don't know.

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